Take My Hand, Not My Picture
Michael Almereyda's Isolated, Independent and Indecisive Hamlet Of the 21st Century

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Pro gradu –tutkielmassani paneudun Michael Almereydan elokuvaan *Hamlet* (2000), joka on modernisoitu versio Shakespearen vanhasta, samannimisestä näytelmästä. Vanhan näytelmän muuntaminen nykyaikaiseksi elokuvaksi on monimutkainen prosessi, ja tässä tutkielmassa keskityn tutkimaan elokuvaksi sovittamisen prosessia paitsi yleisellä tasolla, mutta erityisesti tarkastelen Almereydan tapaa tulkita vanhaa tekstiä modernissa konstekstissa, ja toisaalta myös hänen tulkintaansa modernista ajasta vanhan tekstin kautta. Kuvauspaikat, näyttelijävalinnat, intertekstuaalisuus sekä ennen kaikkea omat mielikuvamme alkuperäistekstistä vaikuttavat tulkintaamme elokuvasovituksista, ja näiden seikkojen tarkastelu muodostaakin oleellisen osan tutkielmaani.

Aluksi käyn läpi adaptaation teoriaa sekä sen historiaa, ts. esittelen eri näkökulmia kirjallisuuden sovittamisesta elokuvaksi, sekä sen teorian asemaa akateemisessa tutkimuksessa. Kautta aikojen elokuva-adaptaatioita on pidetty alempiarvoisina kirjallisuuteen nähden, joten esittelen myös mahdollisia syitä niihin ennakkoluuloihin joita elokuvaversiot kohtaavat. Käsittelen myös "uskollisuuden" tarpeellisuutta elokuva-adaptaatiosta puhuttaessa (ts. kuinka uskollinen filmatisointi on alkuperäistekstille). Uskollisuuteen ja alkuperäisyyteen liittyy läheisesti myös Jean Baudrillard'n ajatus *Simulacrasta*, eli näkemys siitä miten taide itse asiassa onkin vain vanhan toistoa uudessa kontekstissa. Ennen varsinaista analyysiä Almereydan elokuvasta esittelen pikaisesti myös muutaman vaihtoehtoisen filmatisoinnin *Hamletista*, mm. Franco Zeffirellin sekä Laurence Olivierin sovitukset näytelmästä.

Almereydan elokuvassa keskeiseksi kysymykseksi nousee juuri sen moderni ympäristö, jossa roolihahmot kuitenkin puhuvat vanhaa Shakespearen englantia: miksi siis sijoittaa vanha näytelmä vuoden 2000 New Yorkiin, ja toisaalta, miksi keskustella nykyaikaisista ilmiöistä vanhan näytelmän kautta? Teemat Almereydan sovituksessa ovatkin melko universaaleja: autenttisuuden ja totuuden etsintä, kuten myös ihmisten keskinäisten suhteiden vaikeus ja oman itsensä löytäminen ovat läsnä sekä alkuperäisessä näytelmässä että Almereydan elokuvassa. Shakespearen teemoista erityisesti myös kaiken kattava valvonta ja vakoilu ovat saaneet korostetun roolin elokuvassa. Almereydan elokuvaa rytmittääkin ylenpalttisen läsnäoleva ja kahlitseva teknologia, joka osaltaan lamauttaa henkilöhahmojen kyvyn toimia keskenään. Vaikka kokonaisvaltaisesti elokuvan teemat ovatkin yleispäteviä, myös vuosituhannen vaihteen poliittiset ja kulttuurilliset teemat ovat luonnollisesti läsnä Almereydan elokuvassa; mm. massatuotano ja korporatismi saavat osakseen kritiikkiä.

Tutkielmassani pyrin siis tuomaan esiin sitä poliittista ja kulttuurillista taustaa jossa Almereydan *Hamlet* on syntynyt, mutta korostan myös Shakespearen roolia alkuperäistekstinä.

Avainsanat: Almereyda, Baudrillard, elokuva-adaptaatio, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, *simulacra*.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction

> When 'Shakespeare' meets 'The Movies', two mighty entities converge. And while Shakespeare's texts are conceptually and linguistically powerful, and carry with them a tremendous weight of critical commentary and literary/theatrical tradition, their force is matched, and perhaps exceeded, by the power of film – its aesthetic, social and commercial power – to create and convey meanings.[1]

Shakespeare has been adapted to film essentially as long as there has been such a thing as film – over 400 film adaptations were made during the era of the silent film, and about 50 sound films have been made to date.[2] Laurence Olivier, with his mid 20th century films, is considered one of the most prominent adapters of Shakespeare, but the breakthrough of Shakespeare films, according to Russell Jackson, came with Franco Zeffirelli's *The Taming of The Shrew* (1966) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968).[3] After that, Shakespeare was established in the context of popular international cinema, and with it, of course, came potential commercial success. Towards the end of the millennium, several successful adaptations of Shakespeare saw daylight; Kenneth Branagh adapted a number of plays into massive films – *Henry V* (1989*), Much Ado About Nothing* (1994) and *Hamlet* (1996), among others – and in 1990 Mel Gibson took the part of Hamlet in an extremely successful production, directed once again by Zeffirelli. In 1996 Baz Luhrman got even the MTV generation excited about Shakespeare with his high-speed, music video-style *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, starring teen idols Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes.[4]

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[1] Keyishian, Harry. "Shakespeare and movie genre: the case of *Hamlet*." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 72.
[2] Jackson, Russell (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 2.
[3] Jackson 2005, 4.
[4] Ibid.

Adapting a play into a film where images replace words is by no means a simple task, and demands a lot of decision-making; the adapter has to decide who to cast, what to exclude and what to include and how to interpret specific details of a play, among other things. Jackson points out that the most obvious difference between a ready screenplay and a text of, say, an Elizabethan play, is the number of spoken words. To achieve an 'ideal' running time for a movie, less than two hours, that is, most Shakespeare adaptations have had to settle for using only 25-30 per cent of the original texts.[5] In addition, the choice of actors and the *mise-en-scène*, as well as camera angles and intertextual references all influence the way we see the adaptation. In this thesis, therefore, I will take a look at the process of turning an old play into a film, the problematics that may be found in the process, and then take a closer look at a specific case study, Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000).

Almereyda's film uses the language of the "original" play, and it delves into issues that are essential to the play; the names and even the personalities of characters are the same and most of the scenes work essentially quite like in the play. Consequently, we are introduced to Hamlet, who is crushed by the death of his father and by the hasty marriage of his mother Gertrud and uncle Claudius. We see him getting a visit from the Ghost of the old king, who claims that he has, in fact, been murdered by the new king, his own brother. Hamlet is set to find the truth of the matter, and then to avenge the murder. So, we are served the old story almost as it is printed in books. However, the film is situated in a world completely different from Shakespeare's, that is in the corporate New York of the year 2000, and the characters are made to look like modern people – at the end of the day, the setting, costumes and props are the few things Almereyda chooses to modernize in his version of *Hamlet*.

[5] Jackson 2005, 16-17.

But why choose contemporary New York as the vehicle for *Hamlet*, to discuss the human condition and dwell on the problem of authenticity? The question could be turned the other way around, as well: why discuss contemporary phenomena, such as corporate capitalism, through an old play like *Hamlet*? And what, consequently, does this particular adaptation tell about the time of its creation? Also, the world in which Shakespeare found himself writing the play, that is, the socio-cultural environment of the time, is essential to the original play, and is, perhaps, reflected in the film as well, only now in a new context, and it is also this that I will discuss in the course of this thesis.

Since I will be discussing a film that is an adaptation of an earlier text, adaptation theory in general, too, is worth taking a look at. For many decades, film adaptations have suffered from a kind of an inferiority complex as opposed to the original and "higher" art of literature. Accordingly, I will introduce some theoretical approaches to adaptation studies, and try to point out the particularities – if there are any – in adapting plays, as opposed to adapting novels, which is, after all, more common. Moreover, adaptations, by definition, have been accused of not being true to the original text, but the problem of originality is very much present already in the "original" play of Shakespeare, as it, too, is an adaptation of earlier texts. However, Almereyda's film takes the matter even further, as it questions the status of the original by underlining the essence of the copies. This, accordingly, leads into discussion of Jean Baudrillard's ideas of the simulacra, and how copies eventually turn into entities of their own. Even though I will mainly concentrate on Almereyda's work, the original play, as well as other film adaptations of it will be used, to some extent, to compare and contrast Almereyda's choices. However, I will try to avoid comparing the films to the play in the sense of who is more "true" to the original, as it

is, after all, rather pointless. Moreover, the play itself has by now been analyzed into pieces, and it seems that there are essentially as many interpretations of it as there are critics. I will not, therefore, even try to come up with any new, groundbreaking analyses of the play itself, but will, however, use some of the more established critics to help my interpretation of Almereyda's *Hamlet*.

2. *Just to See What All the Fuss Is About* – The Adaptation Process in Theory

Whenever a novel, play, or even a poem is "translated" into a film, questions of the interpretation and "fidelity" towards the original text are bound to rise. Though using pre-existent texts as sources for films is more or less as old as the film itself, the adaptation process per se has not been under much academic discussion. Adaptations have been criticized and discussed ever since film adaptation first appeared, but proper academic discourse of the matter took its time to develop. In what follows, I will take a look at the theory of adaptation; the different theoretical approaches there have been, and what critics tend to concentrate on in their discussion of adaptations.

Most adaptation critics tend to speak about adapting novels only, and the discussion of adapting plays is miniscule. For the time being, however, I will treat the two as equals, or rather, discuss the theory of adaptation on a more general level, and concentrate on the problems of adapting plays in particular more in chapter 3.1.

2.1 *Once Divided, Nothing Left to Subtract* – Some History

The film-makers' reasons to use pre-existent texts as sources for their film move, as Brian McFarlane puts it, between two poles; that of crass commercialism and of high-minded respect for literary works.[6] Dudley Andrew, on the other hand, argues that well over half of all commercial films hail, in fact, from literary originals – whether these originals are revered or not.[7] Consequently, ever since the first Academy Awards were awarded in 1928, more than three-fourths of the best picture awards have gone to adaptations of different kinds;[8] take *Gone With the Wind* (1939) or *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), for instance.

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[6] McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film – An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 7.
[7] Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, 98.
[8] McFarlane 1996, 8.

However, as a subject of a serious scholarly study the field of literature and film is relatively new, and its importance and status have been questioned ever since it emerged in the 1960s. In fact, in the United States it was not until 1957 that the movies had "matured," as James Naremore says, enough to produce a real academic analysis of film adaptation.[9] George Bluestone wrote one of the first books in the field, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema*, in which he argued that there are, after all, movies that do not dishonor their original sources. Bluestone based his book on the idea that the film cannot really acquire any real cultural capital without theorizing a media-specific form, and that the end products of original texts and film embody different aesthetic genera, "as different from each other as ballet is from architecture."[10] Naremore, similarly, claims that adaptations are all about the original texts being metamorphosed into a completely different medium with their own "formal or narratological possibilities."[11] However, though Bluestone aimed to give movies some kind of artistic respectability, there was an air of confirming the "intellectual priority and formal superiority of canonical novels" in his writing.[12] Naremore argues that Bluestone in fact failed to understand that the only way to prevent films to seem "belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior is to devalue straightforward, high-cultural adaptation altogether."[13]

In general, the first studies of film and literature hailed from literature departments, and, according to Robert B. Ray, began their rise just when literature per se was losing its ground as an academic field: "Obviously the admission of film study into literature departments was itself motivated by an attempt to maintain declining

[9] Naremore, James (Ed.). *Film Adaptation.* Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 6.
[10] Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1968, 5.
[11] Naremore 2000, 6.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

enrollments in the humanities."[14] In other words, the departments were desperate to gain more students, and since literature was not enough to appeal to new students, film was taken into the curriculum, in the spirit of "fine, let's give the kids films to watch if they don't want to read." Now, whatever the reasons were for literature and film studies to start gaining popularity, they were – and to some extent still are – restricted to quite a narrow scope of study. Particularly in the early decades of the research, scholars studying film and literature tended to focus on adaptations studies only, or rather, on how "well" the director or the screenwriter had managed to adapt the original story or play in the film. However, as Ray argues, more often than not these scholars were restricted to asking rather simple layman's questions, only about specific individual films, without achieving any larger scale ideas. Consequently the question "How does the film compare with the book?" kept getting the same unproductive answers – "The book was better." Finding ideas and theories that one could generalize, and thus make the study genuinely scholarly, was a major obstacle in the early days of film studies.[15]

The methods of studying film and literature were also taken under scrutiny. Ray points out that film critics seized on "the discovery that the apparently natural norm of realist narrative in fact rested on an ideologically sustained network of stock intertextual connotations."[16] This, then, led to the critique of realism as an inherently repressive mode, as film scholars failed to take advantage of Barthes's suggestive ready-made "analyses of ideology's intertextual migrations,"[17] and to "follow up on Watt's treatment of the novel as a historical formation."[18]

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[14] Ray, Robert B. "The Field of Literature and Film." *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 47.
[15] Ray 2000, 44.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ray 2000, 44.
[18] Ibid.

2.2 New Criticism

As mundane as adaptation study might appear, it did not appear completely without a paradigm. Ray argues that it did, in fact, inherit the notions of the then dominant New Criticism, which, however, "proved ultimately antitheoretical,"[19] as it offered essentially only close reading of particular cases, instead of the "more sweeping, explanatory poetics."[20] Moreover, since New Criticism worshipped what it called "art" (high arts, presumably) and detested translations, i.e. adaptations, a label of inadequacy continued to follow the field; New Criticism seemed to suggest that film versions made out of literary classics failed, by definition, to live up to the original texts. "Indeed, most of the articles written could have used a variation of the words in the title 'But Compared to the Original…'"[21] This idea relies, of course, on the inexhaustible question of the hierarchy between the original and the copy. New Criticism seemed to aim to underline the limitations of the cinema, i.e. what novels can do that films cannot.

Ray sums up his argument about adaptation studies and New Criticism by saying that the reason for scholars to write about adaptation studies to begin with was because

> New Criticism had trained them to do so. For some reason, they did not see that the cinema's very different determinations (commercial exposure, collaborative production, and public consumption) made irrelevant the methods of analysis developed for 'serious literature'.[22]

[19] Ray 2000, 45.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ray 2000, 46.

2.3 Structuralism and Poststructuralism

While New Criticism did not perhaps recognize the possibilities that lie in film, structuralist and poststructuralist theoretical developments on the other hand did, in fact, challenge many of these prejudices and hierarchies that adaptations faced. Robert Stam argues that the structuralist semiotics of the 1960s and the 1970s treated "all signifying practices as shared sign systems productive of 'texts' worthy of the same careful scrutiny as literary texts, thus abolishing the hierarchy between novel and film."[23] Along with this line of thought came the concept of intertextuality; one of the most important theories was Julia Kristeva's intertextuality theory that emphasized the continuous variation of textualities, rather than the "fidelity" of a later text to a specific earlier work.[24]

While the concept of intertextuality did make a difference in adaptation studies in general, there were many other aspects of poststructuralism that still today have not yet "been marshaled in the rethinking of status and practice of adaptation,"[25] as Stam puts it. Poststructuralism dismantled the hierarchy between the original and the copy, and the prestige of the original did not really run counter to the copy, but rather the prestige of the original was in fact created by the copies. Without the copies, there would be no, or at least less, prestige, since without them, originality would have no meaning.[26] Now, copies having worth of their own leads into discussion about Baudrillard's simulacra, but these "copies of copies" will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.6. While New Criticism emphasized organic unity, the poststructuralist criticism raved about the fissures, aporias and excesses of

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[23] Stam, Robert. "The Theory and Practice of Adaptation." *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation.* Ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, 8.
[24] Stam 2005, 8.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

the text, "and if authors are fissured, fragmented, multi-discursive, hardly 'present' even to themselves . . . how can an adaptation communicate the 'spirit' or 'self-presence' of authorial intention?"[27] This downgrading of the author hails partly from Foucault, and so, along with the conception of the author as the orchestrator of pre-existing discourses, the way to a non-originary approach to all arts was opened.[28]

2.4 Further Theoretical Approaches

Other theoretical approaches to the study of adaptation can be found, among others, in the field of cultural studies, which are less concerned with establishing the hierarchies of values, but have rather concentrated on exploring the "horizontal relations between neighboring media." Among other equal cultural productions, "within a comprehensively textualized world of images and simulations," adaptations become just another text with all other, possibly interdisciplinary, texts.[29]

Along with cultural studies, narratology could be seen as a possible theoretical approach to studying film adaptations. Here the narrative in general, as opposed to literary narrative alone, is granted centrality. If we think of the basic concept of narratology as human beings using stories as their main means of making sense of things, then narratologists see the story as a "kind of genetic material or DNA," and that this DNA is "manifested in the body of specific texts."[30] However, these texts are all equal, like in cultural studies, and so literature does not have a privileged position, as adaptations as narratological media have a legitimate place alongside the (original) text.

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[27] Stam 2005, 9.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Stam 2005, 10.

Similarly, reception theory gives more respect for adaptation. For reception theory, the text is a mere event whose indeterminacies are completed only in the actual reading or spectating of it. Consequently then, both the original text and the film are communicative utterances that are socially and situationally constructed, and not just representations of pre-existing reality.[31] So, like poststructuralism, reception theory challenges the notion of the semantic core of a literary work that adaptations are supposed to capture in order to be "faithful," and so the adaptation has more air to breathe as a supplementation of the gaps of literature. Stam argues that the contemporary theory implies that the texts do not know themselves, so it is only natural that the theory is out to find the "non-dit," that is, the unsaid, of the text. Essential in this process of filling in the gaps is the passage of time. Particularly in adaptations of long-concentrated texts – Stam mentions *Robinson Crusoe* as an example – the readers and adapters cannot really be sure, or are at least skeptical, of the novels' basic premises and assumptions, and so some gaps may be filled in a completely new way, appropriate to the given time.[32] In short, we tend to interpret the texts according to the world we live in, and not necessarily the world it was written in.

Along with reception theory, performativity theory has another alternative way of addressing adaptation; it does not only challenge the hierarchies between literature and film, but considers both of them performances, one verbal and the other visual, verbal and acoustic.[33] This approach is based on the idea of making a distinction between constative utterances, that is, utterances making a statement, and performative utterances that are not just true or false like the constative ones, but actually perform the action to which they refer. So, while the literary utterance creates the state of affairs to which it refers, instead of just imitating a pre-existing state of

[31] Stam 2005, 10.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

affairs, equally the filmic adaptation creates a new audiovisual and verbal state of affairs, instead of just imitating the old state of affairs the way they are represented in the source text.[34]

Stam concludes the introduction of different theoretical approaches to adaptations with a constellation of currents such as multiculturalism, postcoloniality, normative race and queer theory, as well as the feminist standpoint theory, which all revolve around issues of identity and oppression, and also have a say on the theory of adaptation. They all have their egalitarian thrust in common, along with their "critique of quietly assumed, unmarked normativities which place whiteness, Europeaness, maleness, and heterosexuality at the center, while marginalizing all that is not normative."[35] Consequently, the implications for adaptations, Stam continues, are multifold. First, there is "a revisionist view of the literary canon, and the inclusion of minority, postcolonial and queer writers" and second, there is "a revisionist of literary history which tends to have a Euro-diffusionist view of the evolution of the novel."[36] The latter entails the idea of the novel beginning in Europe, though it could actually be traced back to, say, Asia. Finally, Stam continues, there is a changed view of oral literature as a justifiable form of literature, as well as a change in the protocols of reading not only novels but also films in ways that are receptive to the multicultural and racial dimensions of all texts; and finally, a possibility of "revisionist adaptations" that take multicultural currents into consideration.[37]

[34] Stam 2005, 11.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

3. *Just Be a Darling and I Will Be Too, Faithful to You* – The Problematics of Staying True to the "Original"

Even though the discussion of fidelity in the process of adaptation has been criticized widely, it has also been such an essential component in the study of film adaptation that it deserves some more discussion. So, what are the reasons behind the "hostility" towards film adaptations of earlier literary works, and what should we be concentrating on instead of dwelling on fidelity?

Whenever a "classic" is turned into a modern film version, a question of fidelity cannot be avoided. However, instead of concentrating only on fidelity, let alone literal fidelity, one could focus on questioning whether the new adaptation succeeds in illuminating the original text's central themes and concerns, or whether the themes are so distorted that the adaptation becomes a vehicle only for contemporary issues. Whether the adaptation covers both contemporary and the original text's concerns could also be under discussion. Critics very eagerly talk about infidelity, betrayal, violation even, and so the standard language, when talking about adaptation criticism has been essentially moralistic, entertaining the idea of the adaptation having done a *disservice*, as Stam argues, to literature.[38]

Though the film industry has created several positive examples of tropes for adaptation, the public discussion still tends to underline loss, grieving over what has been lost in the adaptation process, instead of praising what has been gained. Michael Hattaway even goes as far as claiming that if a screenplay is completely faithful to the original text, the adaptation is more likely to face failure than success: "The 'text' of the film is the film itself, not the text by Shakespeare [or any other author] that generated the scenario that in turn generated the film."[39]

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[38] Stam 2005, 3-4.
[39] Hattaway, Michael. "The Comedies on Film." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 96.

Fidelity criticism, as McFarlane argues, depends mainly on the notion of the text as having and somehow "rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct 'meaning' which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with."[40] Echoing Andrew earlier on, McFarlane also emphasizes the fidelity to the spirit of the novel, rather than to the letter. What it means to be true to the spirit is, of course, quite difficult to determine, as it consists of not only parallelism between the novel or a play and the film, but hesitates also between two or more readings of a text. We have the film-maker's reading of the original, possibly mixed with some other readings, aiming to coincide with the majority's reading or seeing of the story. However, McFarlane continues, since it is highly unlikely that all these determinants of "staying true to the spirit" should coincide, the whole concept of the fidelity approach seems a lost case, and fidelity criticism more or less unilluminating. "That is, the critic who quibbles at failures of fidelity is really saying no more than: 'This reading of the original does not tally with mine in these and these ways.'"[41] Consequently then, Stam argues further, it is perhaps wiser to appreciate these works as independent entities that stand on their own, telling us something of the time they were created in. He suggests that too much weight has been put on the subjective question of the *quality* of the adaptations, rather than discussing the more essential issues, that is the *theoretical status* as well as the *analytical interest* of adaptations.[42]

Derrida, for one, sees the adaptation more like a citation. Everything can be cited, and so the film is not merely an inferior imitation of the original, but rather like a citation that is put into a new context, and "thereby refunctioned."[43] With this kind of thinking then, the adaptation, rather than annihilating, disseminates the literary

[40] McFarlane 1996, 8.
[41] McFarlane 1996, 9.
[42] Stam 2005, 3.
[43] Stam, 2005, 3.

source's meaning in a democratizing process.[44] In sum, the adaptation may in fact have more possibilities than the original. Ray, quoting Walter Benjamin, points out how technical reproduction is able to put the source text into situations that would never be available for the original itself:

> Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. . . . One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. . .[45]

A particular person, in a specific situation, then, watches or hears the adaptation, and so the work gains more meaning, but it is meaning that presumably is not generalizable.

3.1 When *Words, Words, Words* Turn Into *Images, Images, Images* – The Change in the Medium

One of the core issues concerning fidelity in adapting texts into films is the question of whether strict fidelity is something to pursue, and whether it is even possible. McFarlane points out that whatever complaints the audience may have about any given "violation" of the original text, they have still continued "to want to see what the book looks like" through "somebody else's fantasy."[46] Take any recent best-seller, and you are sure to find a film version of it already out or under way – after all, we did not have to wait long to see what books such as *Harry Potter* or *The DaVinci Code* looked like on film. We may complain and crumble is masses about how the film did not live up to our expectations, but still we insist on watching it. Or, as Anthony Burgess once put it: "Every best-selling novel *has* to be turned into a film,

[44] Ray 2000, 45.
[45] Quoted in Ray 2000, 45-6.
[46] McFarlane 1996, 7.

the assumption being that the book itself whets an appetite for the true fulfilment – the verbal shadow turned into light, the word made flesh." [47]

What is different in adapting Shakespeare, though, is the fact that while novels are single medium works of art, performances of a play are, by definition, already also visual, and are influenced by the director. Consequently, they are much closer to film than novels are, and so the problematics that may appear in adapting a novel do not necessarily apply in adapting a play. However, while the play per se is visual, there are only so many things that are possible to do onstage, even with the modern technologies; a play onstage has still rather limited resources, and it has to rely much on the words, on the audience hearing the play. Even the smallest nuances on an actor's face are transmitted to the audience in a close-up on film, but sitting in the back row of a theater, the audience is almost completely unaware of these nuances. Consequently, all small expressions and movements will be lost, so everything important should be audible, or then expressed in bigger movements or gestures.

With a little exaggeration one could also even argue that theater stage performances are more about the actors and their interpretations of the role, or rather, that they perhaps have to focus even more on the overall presence of the character; each performance is unique, and very much dependent on the actor – although the director does establish the framework in which the actors will have to work. Film performances, on the other hand, are even more director-oriented; in directing a film, directors have the right to yell "cut" when the performance is going somewhere it should not be going, and to delete scenes they do not want to include in the final work. However, a film director does not necessarily have more power than a director of a stage performance; the two types of power are just different. In addition, not only

[47] Anthony Burgess. "On the Hopelessness of Turning Good Books into Films." *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 1975, p. 15; quoted in McFarlane 1996, 7.

does the film enable the use of images instead of words, it also directs what we see: watching a play on stage we are able to watch the entire set, while watching a film the camera directs the viewer, deciding on close-ups and camera angles. For instance in Almereyda's adaptation, low shot camera angles work in favor of creating the atmosphere of the film, as they do in Olivier's direction of *Hamlet.*

However, one could of course argue that at the end of the day, many people watching a film version of a Shakespeare play are more likely to have read the play, instead of seeing it onstage – that is, if they have any pre-existing experience of the play to which to compare the adaptation. Therefore, even though the structure of a play on paper is different from that of a novel, it is still a text, and we still draw our own conclusions of it. Here, perhaps, lies the major difference in filming a Shakespeare play and a newer, less established play: again, Shakespeare as a source is a collage of folios, quartos and footnotes, a mix of interpretations of certain scenes and the viewers' own ideas and visions of the play. Adapting a newer play, on the other hand, is likely to encounter fewer, or at least different problems; the author may even still be around to give his or her advice or to collaborate on making the screenplay. There are also fewer pre-existing ideas and expectations of what the adaptation should look like. What is more, a newer play may never have been published, but has only lived as a theatre stage performance. This, of course, is a major difference in comparison to Shakespeare, whose plays are an essential part of world literature studied around the (Western) world.

Overall, films made from Shakespeare's plays exist, according to Jackson, at "a meeting point between conflicting cultural assumptions, rival theories and practices of performances, and – at the most basic level – the uneasy and overlapping systems

of theatre and cinema."[48] Supposedly then, there will always be a conflict of techniques and value systems when old plays such as those of Shakespeare form the source for movies. Similarly, Jackson states, the relationship between Shakespearean films that are aimed at the mass market and the academic study of the plays has been tense throughout times:

> It is probably as much of a mistake to ask whether 'film' can do justice to 'Shakespeare' as to reproach 'Shakespeare' with being inappropriate material for 'film'. Neither are stable entities, reducible to a simple set of definition, but two bundles of techniques and opportunities that may be mixed together with more or less enjoyable and impressive results. We can no more pronounce that *Hamlet* (for example) essentially means one thing or another, and that a particular film fails to capture this quality, than we can object that Shakespearean drama jeopardizes essentially filmic virtues. Nor are 'film' and 'Shakespeare' the same in every 'territory' mapped out by distributors.[49]

In the study of film techniques, Jackson continues, a difference can be made between films in which story-telling is effected by a montage of images – like in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, for instance – and which foreground the means by which this is done; and others which in fact conceal the art that places dramatic scenes before the camera "with an illusion of unobstructed and privileged access for the audience."[50] Viewed from another perspective, one could argue that the most conservative Shakespeare films are those that adopt as much as possible of the play's original structure and language, as if to adapt the film to the accepted way of the mainstream cinema. The more radical versions, however, seek to achieve the play's ends

> by using as fully as possible the medium's ability to juxtapose images and narrative elements, to superimpose one element of the narrative upon another, shift point of view and register, and disrupt the sense of a coherent world seen clearly.[51]

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[48] Jackson 2005, 8.
[49] Jackson 2005, 9.
[50] Jackson 2005, 15.
[51] Jackson 2005, 15-16.

Again, Almereyda, for instance, relies on imagery and incoherent order of scenes, while Olivier's *Hamlet* – despite using clever camera angles – is a film version that is not much different from a stage performance.

It does not make any difference whether we are talking about a "good" or a "bad" adaptation of a text, since a film adaptation automatically defines the framework of a story. While a text allows us to make decisions concerning this framework, a film does all the work for us. Reading a text gives us the possibility to decide on the color of the protagonists' clothes, their hairstyle, the way they speak and what their surroundings look like – providing that they are not described in the text – while watching a film gives little room for our own imagination. All the details have been realized through someone else's ideas and images. Consequently, the idea of the supposed fidelity to the "original" is a rather personal thing. It usually hails from our beliefs of what is the "correct" way to interpret texts, and that some adaptations are simply better than others, or that some adaptations fail to stay "true" to the original. Stam points out how, following this line of thought, then, talking about "betrayal" and "infidelity" is, in fact, quite understandable: if we see an adaptation that does not correspond to our impression of a book we have loved, we are bound to be disappointed. We read a text "through our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias."[52] Stam quotes Jean-Luc Godard on this feeling of betrayal: "We left the theatre sad. It was not the adaptation of which we had dreamed. . . . It wasn't the film we would have liked to make. Or, more secretly, that we would have liked to live."[53] So, the choice of actors, ethnicities, settings, accents and such, all contribute to the way we observe the adaptation and consequently its "fidelity" compared to the thing *we* consider original. Further, Stam points out that the fact that a film is an adaptation

[52] Stam 2000, 56.
[53] Stam 2000, 57.

already alters the original so much that – "due to the change of medium"[54] – chances of strict fidelity are lost already before the film even has a chance to begin. Moving from a "single-track" and purely verbal medium to "multitrack" medium such as the film leads to the impossibility and undesirability of literal fidelity. However, when talking about a play's stage performance, the original is not single-track, but more restricted than the film nevertheless.

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration, Stam argues, is the series of innovations in film technology, which have an effect on the adaptation study as well. Particularly digital media, which more or less incorporates all previous media, has broadened our conception of adaptation. Or rather, it does not make sense to think about adaptations in media-specific terms anymore. Consequently then, novels, films and their adaptations coexist all alongside one another, there being no need for hierarchies.[55]

3.2 Fidelity to What?

Another interesting issue in discussing adaptation and fidelity is the very definition of "the original". Kim Fedderson and J. Michael Richardson point out that the more we move back to find the definite and original version of a play – whether it is performances of some kind, folios, quartos, or just random papers – the more elusive and vague it comes out. This is particularly true in the case of Shakespeare and his plays: Shakespeare as a source could be seen to recede and dissipate "into a tissue of pirated plots, borrowed characters, finched tropes, allusions, and citations,"[56] as we cannot know for sure whose "original" is Shakespeare rewriting in any given play of

[54] Stam 2000, 56.
[55] Stam 2005, 11-12.
[56] Fedderson, Kim and Richardson, Michael J. "Hamlet 9/11: Sound, Noise, and Fury in Almereyda's Hamlet." *College Literature*. Vol 31, Issue 4 (2004), 153.

his. Consequently then, since even the origin of some of Shakespeare's work is not quite clear, how could we – or why should we – even begin to debate the fidelity of an adaptation?

Hamlet, then, may well be Shakespeare's best known and most studied play, but it is also the least original one in terms of plot. We know that well before Shakespeare's version of the play, which he most likely worked on in 1599, there was a revenge tragedy of the same name being played in the theaters of London, during the time when Shakespeare first arrived there. This "Ur-Hamlet," lost since, was possibly written by Thomas Kyd, but even Kyd was not the brains behind the story. As James Shapiro argues, there was a version of the play that hailed already from the twelfth century, when Saxo Grammaticus wrote the story of a legendary Danish revenger Amleth. Besides the similarity in title, the story has a plot more or less the same as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – there is a king murdered by his brother, who then marries the queen, while the son, planning to revenge his father's death, pretends to be mad, and winds up being spied on by others, eventually avenging the murder. Even between the old play *Hamlet* and Saxo's tale, there is Francois de Belleforest's version of a very similar story.[57]

In short, then, it is rather impossible to define "the original" when talking about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as it, too, is an adaptation. The only character, Shapiro argues further, that appears to be Shakespeare's invention is, in fact, Fortinbras, the Norwegian prince who threatens invasion at the outset and succeeds to the throne at the end.[58] The character of Fortinbras, in fact, gives us an indication of the anxieties of the time when Shakespeare was writing the play, as the threat of a foreign powers' invasion was very much present at the time. In 1599 Elizabethans had to worry about

[57] Shapiro, James. *1599 – A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005, 319-20.
[58] Shapiro 2005, 320.

organizing an army to crush an Irish rebellion, endure an armada threat from Spain, and gamble on a fledgling East India Company while waiting to see who would succeed their childless Queen, who was growing old.[59] So, while waiting to see whether there would be a war with Spain, and with an unsettled situation in Ireland, the sentiments of "All is not well" hailed, at least partially, from real life. Spying and distrust were everywhere. *Hamlet*, then, is very much stamped by the extremely unsettling mood of the time:

> Shakespeare was as good as his word in *Hamlet* that the 'purpose of playing' was to show 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (III, ii, 20-24). An anxious Rowland Whyte could have easily been speaking of Claudius' court when he wrote to Sir Robert Sidney this autumn: 'There is such observing and prying into men's actions that I hold them happy and blessed that live away.' 'As God help me,' Whyte warns, 'it is a very dangerous time here.[60]

For the audience, then, Shakespeare's new play offered no relief from the oppressing situation.

Consequently, the play was written, as Shapiro puts it, "at the crossroads of the death of chivalry and the birth of globalization."[61] Catholicism had lost its ground and the whole society appeared to be in a state of change: audiences at the Globe, like Hamlet himself, found themselves "straddling worlds and struggling to reconcile past and present."[62] Similarly, Jonathan Dollimore quotes Albert Camus and claims that tragedy is, in fact, generated by a particular kind of historical transition:

> 'Tragedy is born in the West each time that the pendulum of civilization is halfway between a sacred society and a society built around man.' . . .man 'frees himself from an older form of civilization and finds that he has broken away from it without having found a new form which satisfies him.'[63]

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[59] Shapiro 2005, xv.
[60] Shapiro 2005, 317.
[61] Shapiro 2005, 309.
[62] Shapiro 2005, 322.
[63] Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy – Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1984, 68.

So, if we think of Catholicism as the older form of civilization, and Protestantism as something that had not yet completely found its ground in the Elizabethan society, Camus's theory of the birth of tragedy does seem to apply to *Hamlet*.

Further, Dollimore claims that the view of Shakespeare and his contemporaries adhering to the theories of the "so-called Elizabethan World picture has long been discredited," and that there is, regardless of this, no "adequate conception of their [Shakespeare's and his contemporaries'] actual relationship to it."[64] The ideology of the Elizabethan World Picture, Dollimore continues, was built around the central principle of teleological design; "the divine plan in-formed the universe generally and society particularly, being manifested in both as Order and Degree."[65] What is more, identity and purpose were inescapably related with one another, with "both deriving from the person's (or any thing's) place in the design."[66] These ideas, then, were used as an amalgam of religious belief, which, in short, served mainly to strengthen the unstable monarchy that lacked a standing army. Consequently, here, like at any cultural moment, there were bound to exist also emergent elements that coexisted with the residual and dominant ones.[67] This line of thought can, indeed, be connected to Hamlet: particularly towards the end of the play, there is an air of resignation to the divine plan. Suddenly Hamlet accepts his fate and the order of things, instead of swimming upstream as he does for the most of the play: both the original Hamlet of the play, and particularly that of Almereyda's, represent something of an emerging culture, someone who does not identify himself with the mainstream. Dollimore links these concepts even further with the tragedy in particular:

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[64] Dollimore 1984, 6.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Dollimore 1984, 7.

> It is, then, a tragedy which violates those cherished *aesthetic* principles which legislate that the ultimate aim of art is to order discordant elements; to explore conflict in order ultimately to resolve it; to explore suffering in order ultimately to transcend it. All three principles tend to eliminate from literature its socio-political context (and content), finding instead supposedly timeless values which become the *universal* counterpart of man's *essential* nature – the underlying human essence.[68]

Supposedly then, if Elizabethan drama lacked some of this aesthetic completeness and ethical resoluteness, Dollimore argues, it had to be seen to lack these things in order to "then be seen to possess real (i.e. historical) significance."[69] So, is there no ethical resolution in *Hamlet*? I would argue that there are, still, much of the "timeless values", as well as socio-political aspects in the play.

Here, then, we are given a good example of how plays, novels or poems, even, are products of their time. Consequently, also the adaptations of these works are bound to discuss not only the original matters, but also issues of their own time, and here, in fact, we get an example of the universality of *Hamlet*. If the play was written at the crossroads of chivalry being lost and globalization being born, Almereyda's work is situated in a very similar point of history. While Shakespeare's world was growing rapidly with expeditions and innovations in sciences – not long before Shakespeare's time, for example, the geocentric model of the world had been annihilated – Almereyda's Hamlet finds himself in a world that is being taken over by technology. Heliocentrism is replaced by technocentrism, and as the millennium drew closer to its end, the hype of a possible Y2K chaos gained more ground. The Western world found itself in a place it apparently aspired to be in, but on the other hand did not know how to handle. Similarly, the more globalization spread, it seemed, the more isolated people became. This, however, will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.5.

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[68] Dollimore 1984, 8.
[69] Ibid.

In a word, then, an adaptation – be it Shakespeare or not – should be able to cling to its origin, if such a thing is possible, while at the same time be an entity of its own, and not a plain repetition of its origin. To be able to do this, the film should be able to break loyalty and establish an identity "not wholly contained within, nor scripted by, the past . . . it must be an act of translation, a transference from one system of representation into another."[70] This, of course, should be obvious, but rarely succeeded in.

3.3 Why the Prejudice Towards Adaptations?

While there well may be adaptations that are mediocre and off-track, much of the prejudice towards all adaptations still hails from the (supposed) superiority literature and even play scripts have over film. Kamilla Elliot argues that adaptations are, by definition, perceived as "less": on the one hand they are "less" as novels (or play scripts) since they are just, again, copies of the original, and on the other hand they are less as films, as they fail to represent "pure film" – "they lack representational fluency on [their] own grounds."[71]

To understand the dichotomy and assumptions about the relations between the two forms of arts, literature and film, Stam lists a number of reasons behind the prejudices. First of all, he argues, the valorization of "historical anteriority and seniority"[72] comes in the way of adaptations: the somewhat archaic assumption of older works of art being better thwarts the latter ones' possibilities of being appreciated. Arts in general certainly do tend to build up prestige over time, so following this pattern of logic, it is understandable why a film adaptation of a four-

[70] Walker, Elsie. "Shakespeare on Film: Early Modern Texts, Postmodern Statements." *Literature Compass*. Vol 1 (2003), 1.
[71] Elliot, Kamilla. "Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate," p. 27, quoted in Stam 2005, 8.
[72] Stam 2005, 4.

hundred-year-old play would be less valorized than the play itself. There is not only the priority of literature and writing drama to cinema, but also the "specific priority of novels to their adaptations."[73] Stam attacks this rigid bias and claims that more often than not, comparisons between the two art forms are made of literature at its best and cinema at its worst.

As another "source of hostility" towards adaptations Stam sees the general dichotomy in the rivalry between the two arts, and depicts the struggle as a Darwinian battle. Supposedly then, it is all about the survival of the fittest between the two, rather than about taking advantage of the mutual benefit of cross-fertilization.

> Adaptation becomes a zero-sum game where film is perceived as the upstart enemy storming the ramparts of literature… Leo Tolstoy saw film as "a direct attack on the old methods of literary art," which obliged writers, in a symptomatic choice of words, to "adapt" to the new medium… Filmic embodiment is seen as making literature obsolescent, retroactively revealing mere words as somehow weak and spectral and insubstantial. [74]

The dichotomy Stam draws between film and literature is strong and cannot, perhaps, be applied as such in Shakespeare, since issues that concerned Tolstoy did not necessarily concern playwrights of the 15th and the 16th century.

When talking about cinema, the key difference to literature is, of course, images, and so Stam argues that the third major source of hostility towards adaptation is iconophobia. When talking strictly about novels only, this prejudice against visual arts hails, among others, from the traditional religious prohibitions of "graven images," as well as from the "Platonic and Neoplatonic depreciation of the world of phenomenal appearance."[75] In other words, while the religious aspect stems from forbidding "the making of idols in the form of anything," in the Platonic view "the

[73] Stam 2005, 4.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Stam 2005, 5.

irresistible allure of the spectacle overwhelms reason."[76] Plato's polemic against poetry, then, gets "subliminally enlisted in an attack on contemporary visual arts and the mass media, seen as corrupting the audience through dangerously delusional fictions."[77] Somehow, though, this gives little credit to people's own capability to think and form their own opinion. True enough, the visual (medium) does perhaps gnaw something off of literature when it is adapted to something else than just words on paper, but at its best, the two different channels can coexist and feed off of each other. Also, whether theater stage performances should be considered fully as visual arts is questionable: certainly a play onstage is a visual experience for the audience, but perhaps even more an audiovisual one, with the emphasis on the hearing experience. Films, on the other hand, are so much more clearly visual, as images take over the language.

While the debate over images vs. words could go on indefinitely, Stam goes on to list further sources of hostility: from logophilia – valorization of the verbal – he jumps into dwelling on the idea of anti-corporeality, that is, the dislike of the "unseemly 'embodiedness' of filmic text."[78] Somehow literature, unlike film, is "seen as channeled higher, more cerebral, trans-sensual and out-of-body plane;" this means that the film is absorbed through more than one sense, and so it is "more directly implicated in bodily response than novels."[79] To explain this further, Stam gives examples such as scenes with Cinerama-style rollercoaster rides that give vertiginous effect, and kinesthetic and kinetic scenes that may cause even physical nausea or mental disorder.[80] Again, here the status of drama is somewhat unclear: if we think of plays as play scripts on paper only, then they can easily be seen as being just verbal,

[76] Stam 2005, 5.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Stam 2005, 6.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

like literature. However, if we think of the plays also as stage performances, the categorization gets more complicated, as the performances inhabit a space somewhere in between visual and verbal. However, if we keep in mind that the majority of the viewers of adaptations are more bound to have read and not seen the play, seeing plays as verbal only is justified.

In a word, then, there is the very hierarchy with body and mind as there is with image and word. This prejudice is mapped onto other such hierarchical pairs, especially onto surface and depth, and so film, again, is dismissed as something that deals with surfaces only, or, in other words, fails to achieve anything beyond superficiality.[81] Naremore leads us back to the poststructuralist dichotomy when he writes about the same binary oppositions:

> Even when academic writing on the topic is not directly concerned with a given film's artistic adequacy or fidelity to a beloved source, it tends to be narrow in range, inherently respectful of the "precursor text," and consecutive of a series of binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy. Such oppositions are themselves the products of the submerged common sense of the average English department, which is composed of a mixture of Kantian[82] aesthetics and Arnoldian[83] ideas about society.[84]

Naremore seems to be on the same track with Stam; traditionally there is only the dichotomy between the "higher" and the "lower" arts, and films have consequently been ranked in their capability to parrot the original. He goes on to argue that because of this sort of an Arnoldian background, English professors have traditionally been

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[81] Stam 2005, 7.
[82] "When I use the term *Kantian* I am speaking of a slightly older, more complex, mode of idealist philosophy that emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century . . . all art in the European world was theorized under what might be roughly described as a Kantian set of assumptions; that is, both making and the appreciation of art were conceived as specialized, autonomous, and transcendent activities having chiefly to do with a media-specific form." Naremore 2000, 2.
[83] "When I use the term *Arnoldian* I am chiefly referring to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1896), which argues that culture is synonymous with great works of art and that the inherited cultural tradition of the Judeo-Christian world, embodied in 'the best that has been thought and said,' can have a civilizing influence, transcending class tensions and leading to a more humane society." Naremore 2000, 2.
[84] Naremore 2000, 2.

quite suspicious of mass-produced narratives from Hollywood, as they apparently threaten or demean the values of "organic" popular culture as well as high literary culture.[85]

With the dichotomy between the two arts there is, in fact, some historical irony; during the first half of the 20th century, simultaneously with the movies, the genuine theater, and the book-publishing industry growing closer together, the sophisticated arts in general were "in active rebellion against bourgeois culture and was intentionally producing work that could not be easily assimilated into the mainstream."[86] However, while the film might have been regarded as mass production and lower culture, it was Hollywood that provided a major source of income for authors such as Eugene O'Neill, Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner;[87] so, working with films, then, might have been vulgar, but the money coming from it certainly was not frowned on.

Moving on with Stam's list, we find a rather interesting statement; he argues that a significant issue in the endless reasons behind hostility towards adaptations would be "the myth of facility," which entails the idea of films being, by definition, easy to make. The director only "films what is there," and so the film only "registers external appearances," and this, supposedly, prevents it from being true art.[88] Similarly this myth entails the cliché of facility in the idea of films being only enjoyable and easy to watch, as if it did not require any mental activity to sit down and watch a film, when in fact it is all about understanding what one sees or reads. In short, this kind of an approach to disregarding adaptations belittles the director's efforts on one side, and the viewers' ability to understand it on the other: "…it ignores

[85] Naremore 2000, 2.
[86] Naremore 2000, 4-5.
[87] Naremore 2000, 4.
[88] Stam 2005, 7.

the intense perceptual and conceptual labor – the work of iconic designation, visual deciphering, narrative inference, and construction – inherent in film."[89] Like the source text, a film may need "rereading," as there is much that might be missed at the first viewing.

Furthermore, another form of dichotomy may be linked to sources of hostility, i.e. "a subliminal form of class prejudice."[90] The cinema can be associated with mass audiences, and thus be degraded somewhat. Supposedly it is vulgar, particularly when compared to the fine art of literature, and is thus automatically associated with the lower classes. Whether there is such a strong sense of class still today is debatable, but Stam's point is a valid one – "those who will not bother to read the book go see the film." Stam concludes his list of sources of hostility with a notion of parasitism, as if adaptations were somehow parasitical on literature, burrowing their way into the body of the source text, stealing its vitality.[91] More often than not, adaptations are reported to more or less suck the life out of the original, while in fact, in many cases it might be the other way around; an old text may get a new life in a new context.

The question seems to be whether the adaptation can ever be "good". Russell Jackson argues that while a film's ultimate measure of worth may not be the degree of fidelity to the original text, understanding the relationship between the two is a crucial element in the way we perceive the film.[92] While a supposedly "faithful" film is regarded as somehow uncreative, an unfaithful film, on the other hand, ends up being disgraceful treachery of the original. Similarly, an adaptation that somehow updates the original text is rebuked for failing to represent the true period of the source text, whereas faithful costume dramas are dismissed for not being able to contemporize the

[89] Stam 2005, 7.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Jackson 2005, 16.

text. If sexuality is brought forth literally, the adaptation is vulgar, and if it is not, the adaptation is accused of cowardice. Further, with the fidelity question still in mind, one could ask how a text could even begin to be true to the author when, according to Proust, authors themselves are not always aware of their own intentions. In the postmodern spirit that Almereyda's *Hamlet*, for instance, can be seen, again Foucault's ideas of the importance of the author can be taken into consideration: the "downgrading of the author in favor of a pervasive anonymity of discourse opened the way to a 'discursive' and nonoriginary approach to all art;" the author, accordingly, loses focus and firmness.[93]

A further point, though a mundane one, to be made about the differences between originals and adaptations is the question of finances: while a novel can be written "on napkins in prison, a film assumes a complex material infrastructure – camera, film stock, laboratories – simply in order to exist."[94] Writing a play called *Hamlet* some 400 odd years ago did not really require anything but a quill and paper (and using other people's plots), but producing a movie of the same name in the 21st century requires essentially a whole army to produce it, all the way from the director him- or herself to the assistant who makes the coffee. However, again the difference between writing a novel and a play that will actually be performed onstage is relevant. While writing a novel does not require much, the play was written to be performed, and for the performance Shakespeare did need a space to play in, the actors for his characters, costumes and props; all this, however, is perhaps not really comparable with what it takes to produce a film.

With all this considered, it does make sense to question the necessity and possibility of literal fidelity. Elsie Walker claims that much of the film criticism on

[93] Stam 2000, 58.
[94] Stam 2000, 56.

Shakespeare is and has in fact been concerned with the author's intention as well as the "proximity to the 'original' text", and she echoes Stam in concluding that this kind of thinking is problematic given the collaborative and intertextual nature of these works.[95] So, while Almereyda's version of *Hamlet* is extremely intertextual, so is the original. Apart from being built on older sources, the play we today know as *Hamlet* has most likely been molded by different versions of Shakespeare's play, even by the actors in different performances. Curiously Shakespeare even has allusions to his other texts, such as Julius Caesar, inserted in the play:

> With *Hamlet*, the cross-pollination of the plays reaches another level when Polonius unexpectedly tells Hamlet, 'I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th'Capitol; Brutus killed me' (III,ii,99). John Heminges, who played older men, probably spoke these lines and also played Caesar. The in-joke, which audiences at the Globe would have shared, is that Richards Burbage, who was playing Hamlet and had played Brutus, was about to stab Heminges again.[96]

So, we have intertextualities, pirated plots, uncertainties of the meanings of the author, a battle between film and literature, and the massive change in the media on our hands: fidelity, in its most puritan meaning is, I would argue, impossible. What it all apparently boils down to, as Stam points out, is that the adapter can never win;[97] choose one way of adapting and you are accused of one thing, choose another way, you will be accused of something else

[95] Walker 2003, 1.
[96] Shapiro 2005, 367.
[97] Stam 2005, 8.

4. Adapting Shakespeare – Alternative Hamlets

> As T.S. Eliot noted years back, *Hamlet* is like Mona Lisa, something so overexposed you can hardly stand to look at it.[98]

Hamlet is one of the best-known plays of Shakespeare, and consequently one of the most filmed ones. Each adaptation is a child of its own time, and the choice of actors is a crucial part of the interpretation of the film. In fact, one of the most peculiar things that affect the "fidelity" issue, as well as our way of perceiving a film, is the choice of actors in any given adaptation, whether it is on film or on stage. While literature, be it novels or play scripts, has a single entity, that is, the character, film adaptations and stage performances have both the character and the performer whose identity cannot be completely made to vanish from the role he or she is playing. This duality in representation on film then enables contradictions that would not be possible in a medium that is only verbal; though actors should perhaps not be thought of in the context of their previous roles, their earlier performances nevertheless do play a role in the interpretation of a film. Our impressions of the film may be influenced by what we know of the actors' personal life, and also Hollywood has long known how to take advantage of this:

> At its most extreme, the Hollywood system sought to codify even its leading actors, turning them into predictability signifying objects, not only through consistent cinematic use (typecasting), but also through extracinematic, semiliterary forms of publicity (press releases, fan magazine articles, bois, interviews, and news plants). Long before its critics, in other words, Hollywood recognized the perpetual interchange between film and writing and its role in creating (or controlling) meaning.[99]

By casting certain types of actors and by exploiting a reputation or general connotations linked with an actor, the director is able to take the movie to a specific direction that could not be achieved in any other way. Casting actors usually known

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[98] Almereyda, Michael. *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A screenplay adaptation.* New York: Faber and Faber, 2000, viii.
[99] Ray 2000, 40.

as comedians into serious roles may give the film a certain controversy, or similarly, casting a Hollywood superstar is bound to help a potentially independent, or even low-budget film attract more audience and consequently help the film's finances, if not anything else.

For instance, as Harry Keyishian argues, Franco Zeffirelli in his 1990 *Hamlet* decided to cast Mel Gibson, a seemingly unlikely choice, as his Hamlet: "Whatever Zeffirelli's film did, it aimed to satisfy fans who went to the theatre to see a Gibson movie."[100] J. Lawrence Guntner argues further that casting Gibson is a giveaway allusion to the somewhat suicidal action hero of *Lethal Weapon*,[101] and Douglas Lanier argues that it was, in fact, a single scene in *Lethal Weapon* – the one in which Mel Gibson considers shooting himself – that convinced Zeffirelli to cast Gibson as his Hamlet.[102] Also, Glenn Close, the "threatening other woman" from *Fatal Attraction*,[103] as Gertrude, should not be dismissed, as there are similarities with the two roles these actors interpreted, particularly given Gertrud and Hamlet's somewhat oedipal relationship in Zeffirelli's direction.[104]

Kenneth Branagh, likewise, cast a plethora of Hollywood stars for his full-text version of Hamlet. However, his reasons, according to Guntner, were more in paying homage to "those living actors and actresses who have shaped our perception of Shakespeare on the stage and screen in the twentieth century . . ."[105] Now, whether casting Julie Christie, Charlton Heston, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams and even Richard Attenborough, among many others, is paying homage to anyone is anyone's

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[100] Keyishian, Harry. "Shakespeare and movie genre: the case of Hamlet." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 78.
[101] Directed by Richard Donner, 1987.
[102] Lanier, Douglas M. "Shakescorp Noir." *Shakespeare Quarterly*. Vol 53, Issue 2 (2002), 178.
[103] Directed by Adrian Lyne, 1987.
[104] Guntner, Lawrence J. "*Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear* on Film." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film.* Ed. Russell Jackson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 120.
[105] Guntner 2005, 122.

guess. Now, even if he had cast only "great Shakespearean actors" and done so in such abundance, the result might not have been any different. Whatever Branagh's reasons for casting such a group were, there is room for some criticism: since many of the stars had only minor roles, there is an air of casting celebrities just for the sake of it, perhaps at the cost of artistic coherence. However, Keyishian argues that this kind of casting does work as a "strategy of amplification:"[106] Jack Lemmon as Marcellus is, in fact, no Marcellus, but Jack Lemmon himself, bringing in the weight of his rich career. His presence, as well as that of Charlton Heston's, supposedly, sets the movie in film history, as they allude "to the larger story of the film medium itself."[107] Similarly, Billy Crystal and Robin Williams bring something of their previous comic roles to Branagh's epic and flamboyant *Hamlet*.[108]

While Branagh's choice was more or less to cast every imaginable actor, Laurence Olivier, for his 1946 version of the play, chose to cast non-celebrities whose fame or reputation would not "detract from his own performance" as Hamlet.[109] While Olivier's decision may have been made in sheer vanity, there is rationality in it: the play *is* about Hamlet and his inner world, and had there been big stars with the ghosts of their previous roles on their shoulders around all the time, the coherence of the film might have suffered.

As for different levels of "fidelity" in different *Hamlets*, there is much variety. While Olivier chooses to use only about half of the text, Kenneth Branagh, in directing the longest version of *Hamlet* ever, gloated over including "full folio text along with insertions from the second quarto."[110]

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[106] Keyishian 2005, 78.
[107] Keyishian 2005, 80
[108] Ibid.
[109] Guntner 2005, 123.
[110] Walker 2003, 1. The uncut version of Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) is 242 min.

> He [Branagh] promised, without irony, to present 'for the first time, the full unabridged text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet'*, 'the most fully authentic version of the play' in which he saw an 'all-embracing survey of life.'[111]

In the spirit of "more Shakespeare for your money," Branagh's work is surely an ambitious one, but whether a "complete" translation of a play like this should be regarded as somehow better or more valuable is debatable. However, most, if not all performances of *Hamlet* do show an "anxiety over Shakespeare's influence upon them."[112] Also the themes to which different directors concentrate vary. Zeffirelli, for instance, concentrated on the mother-son relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude, while Branagh, in his massive version of *Hamlet* seems to dwell on the rot found within the kingdom. In short, without putting too much weight on the fidelity and the original, any given adaptation does hail from somewhere, and the origin, whatever it may be, should not be dismissed.

[111] Walker 2003, 1; quoting Branagh's *Screenplay and Introduction* of *Hamlet* (1996).
[112] Walker 2003, 1.

5. Michael Almereyda's Adaptation Skills at Test

Michael Almereyda's version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the tragic prince of Denmark, is probably one of the most controversial ones made in the past decade or two; it may not be the greatest adaptation of the play, but in its curiosities certainly an interesting one. The film takes place in New York in the year 2000; the State of Denmark is now Denmark Corporation run by Claudius, and Elsinore a five star hotel. Like in adaptations in general, the choices of cast, *mise-en-scène*, up to the clothes Almereyda's characters wear all have a specific meaning in the "reading" of the film. Also music is in quite a central role in Almereyda's film; many scenes are flavored with classical masterpieces by Tchaikovsky and Liszt, but it is Primal Scream, Nick Cave (with his song appropriately titled "Hamlet (Pow Pow Pow)") and Morcheeba in the background that bring the film to the 20th/21st century.

Some critics see Almereyda's adaptation as a successful translation of the old play: Courtney Lehman, for instance, argues that though the film is "quintessentially postmodern," it does not fail to interpret the play's text.[113] However, many do not see any of the essential Shakespeare in Almereyda's work. The *Washington Post* film critic Desson Howe argues that the film upends the play's priorities because it is more about "a society enmeshed in its own modern culture than it is … about the Prince of Denmark."[114] Now, one could of course question Howe's point: the play *is* about a Danish Prince, but his nationality and royal status are hardly the most important aspects of the play. Joana Owens goes on to say that such conflicting attitudes often stem from the way the critic in question views the "function of the mechanically or electronically reproduced images that permeate the film."[115] Again, then, we are back

[113] Quoted in Owens, Joana. " 'Images, Images, Images': The Contemporary Landscape of Michael Almereyda's Hamlet." *Interdisciplinary Humanities*. Vol 20, Issue 2 (2003), 22.
[114] Quoted in Owens 2003, 22.
[115] Owens 2003, 22.

at the personal aspect of viewing an adaptation: what is important for someone may be irrelevant for another, and so there will probably never be a complete consensus in the criticism of adaptations.

Though set in surroundings not typically Shakespearean, Almereyda's film is true to the original lines of the play, even when chunks of the text is lost in the process and many scenes are seen in an unorthodox order. Here the dependency on the original text is obvious, as Almereyda's version is quite – for the lack of a better word – faithful to the supposed original. Fedderson and Richardson argue that many parts of the film give us only "maximal iteration and minimal translation;"[116] in a word, despite the modern settings, many scenes are produced in a traditional way.

> As a parasite, Almereyda's *Hamlet* is dependent upon its host – Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – for its existence yet it is simultaneously engaged in a struggle to differentiate itself from it and so establish a separate identity for itself.[117]

The fact that Almereyda has his otherwise modern characters in suits and high-fashion clothes, in the middle of modern Manhattan, amid all the technology, speaking Elizabethan English is interesting; why, after modernizing the setting, not modernize the language? For instance, why would Almereyda have a modern girl like Ophelia address her boyfriend as "My Lord"? An easy answer could be, of course, that doing anything on the contrary would diminish the adaptation's prestige. If the language was to be translated into modern colloquial English, the film would lose some of it "Shakespeareness," and become just another spin-off of the plot.

For Almereyda, apparently, it is all about the language, and tampering with Shakespeare's language would make little sense. "…you don't need lavish production values to make a Shakespeare movie that's accessible and alive. Shakespeare's language, after all, is lavish enough. The meaning and emotion are all embedded

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[116] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 154.
[117] Walker 2003, 1.

there, line for line, word for word."[118] – This, of course, is somewhat surprising coming from a man who is, yes, true to the language, but who also replaces words with images abundantly in the film. However, the use of the original language so completely out of its "original" context does create a certain tension to the film, and brings some kind of controversial entropy to the adaptation.

5.1 Almereyda's Change in the Medium

Shakespeare, as L.C. Knights points out, was a master at establishing the atmosphere of his plays right from the start. In *Hamlet*, then, we are told of the cold and dark that surround the watchmen, and of the stillness – "Not a mouse stirring"[119] – in which "men's voices ring out sharply and with subdued apprehension."[120] The film, however, relies on other means to establish the mood of the film: a film may play not only with words, but also with "theatrical performance, music sound effects, and moving photographic images,"[121] all of which Almereyda lavishly uses in his work. Consequently, words are replaced with images of dark and oppressive shots of the skyscrapers, neon lights and inhumane spaces, and so we do not need Shakespeare's lines in the beginning of the play to describe the mood. As a result, Almereyda has omitted Francisco's "I am sick at heart,"[122] which bluntly tells us from the beginning that all is not well. Similarly Hamlet's gut feeling that "All is not well. / I doubt some foul play…Foul deeds will rise…"[123] is omitted as the film implies an unavoidable tragedy through images. Stephanie Zacharek points out that it is, in fact,

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[118] Almereyda 2000, viii.
[119] Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet. The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Thomson Learning, 2003, 1:1:11.
[120] Knights, L.C.. *Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to* Hamlet. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. 1966, 181.
[121] Stam 2000, 56.
[122] *Hamlet*, 1:1:9.
[123] *Hamlet*, 1:2:255-7.

the visuals in the film that make it feel like *Hamlet*, and while other productions may use dialogue to express the central themes – surveillance, imprisonment and hypocrisy – Almereyda relies on imagery.[124]

Fedderson and Richardson give Reynaldo as an example of images replacing even actual characters. Reynaldo, a minor character, has a function to take money to Laertes and to spy on him, on behalf of his father Polonius. Having been omitted in Almereyda's film, his function still remains in the form of an image of Polonius himself secretly sneaking money into the pocket of Laertes's jacket, while his intrusiveness and distrust comes across in his prying nature.[125] In short, "Almereyda simply does not need Reynaldo in order to show that the rot in Denmark has penetrated to the heart of this family too."[126]

5.2 From the Grungy Generation X to Blue Velvet – Almereyda's Cast

Sometimes the baggage, a "thespian intertext formed by the totality of antecedent roles,"[127] as Stam calls it, that comes with an actor might actually not work for the good of the film, but in Almereyda's *Hamlet* the connotations brought with the actors seem to work positively. Or, better said, the choices seem to be very much intentional.

5.2.1 *Smells Like Teen Spirit* – Ethan Hawke as Hamlet

The concept of an actor bringing along a "baggage" of previous roles appears to be particularly evident in Almereyda's Hamlet, played by Ethan Hawke. The sulky, grungy and alternative young man is the embodiment of the lost-with-itself Generation X of the late 20th century. Alienation, isolation and irresoluteness were not

[124] Stephanie Zacharek in *Salon Magazine*, May 12th, 2000. (Quoted in Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 149).
[125] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 153.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Stam 2000, 60.

only problems of the Hamlet Shakespeare wrote about, but also of the contemporary Western society. Alessandro Abbate quotes Johan Galtung on the phenomenon by claiming that "at the end of the second millennium, Western society is well on the way to turning into 'a heap of mutually isolated social atoms'."[128] In a society where people are supposedly connected to each other 24/7, human isolation appears to be spreading like the plague.

Fedderson and Richardson argue that Hawke was in fact chosen to play Hamlet precisely because many of his past roles represented the estranged young people of the Generation X.[129] Hawke's interpretations of characters such as the frustrated cynic Troy Dyer in *Reality Bites*[130] – one of the most famous Generation X movies – as well as the roles of the "disaffected youths"[131] in *Dead Poets Society*[132] and *Gattaca*[133] are very much like that of Almereyda's Hamlet. Hawke himself has stated that he saw Hamlet as a combination of Holden Caulfield, the confused protagonist who roams the streets of New York in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, another figurehead of the Generation X.

> He is a bright young man struggling deeply with his identity, his moral code, his relationship with his parents and with his entire surrounding community. These are archetypal young man's concerns. Hamlet was always much more like Kurt Cobain of Holden Caulfield than Sir Laurence Olivier.[134]

While similarities between Holden Caulfield and Hamlet could make quite a list, there are some essential points to back Hawke's idea. More than anything, the two young men are lost with themselves; somewhat suicidal, sick of all the dishonesty and lack of authenticity that surrounds them. Hamlet seeks authenticity and Holden feels he is

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[128] Abbate, Alessandro. " 'To Be or Inter-Be': Almereyda's end-of-millennium Hamlet." *Literature Film Quarterly*. Vol 32, Issue 2 (2004), 82.
[129] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 156.
[130] Directed by Ben Stiller, 1994.
[131] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 157.
[132] Directed by Peter Weir, 1989.
[133] Directed by Andrew Niccol 1997.
[134] Hawke, in Almereyda 2000, xiv.

surrounded by phonies, so both are in search of something real, while worried about the state of man.

Pushing the connection with grunge even further, another link between Kurt Cobain and Hawke's Hamlet could be drawn. Cobain was notoriously self-destructive, and was often posing in pictures with a gun pointed to his head. Similarly, in Almereyda's film there is a scene with Hawke as Hamlet taking a gun from his temple to the jaw and back while thinking whether he should be or not. Of course, Cobain decided not to be anymore and shot himself in the head with a shotgun, while Hamlet – at least not directly – chooses not take his own life. Accordingly, while Cobain was the martyr-like figurehead of the grunge generation, Holden Caulfield was the rebel of the beat generation of the fifties, and Almereyda's Hamlet is a combination of the two, a hero of the millennial anti-capitalism, anti-mass production, anti-everything.

Further, Fedderson and Richardson point out that no matter how the adaptation is made, Hamlet's sense of alienation has to come across. In the play, there is, for instance, the inky cloak to show his mourning, not to mention the various lines he speaks of his gloomy moods – take, for instance "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth…"[135] However, Almereyda's Hamlet is a man who seems to have lost "his mirth" long before his father's death, and not just "of late;" his condition, it seems, is "a year-2000 form of clinical depression."[136] However, this modern Hamlet wears no inky cloaks, but a Peruvian ski cap, which instead of the cloak serves to signify his difference and alienation from the Denmark Corporation;[137] it is also yet another reminder of the grunge fashion. And though Almereyda offers us a ski cap instead of an inky cloak, we still get Gertrud's concern and advice: "Good

[135] *Hamlet* 2:2:295-6.
[136] Abbate 2004, 83.
[137] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 154.

Hamlet, cast thy knighted colour off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark."[138]

All in all, in Hawke's representation of Hamlet, there is, perhaps, an air of too-much-grunge: indeed, he seems to be a young man who never had any mirth to lose to begin with, and so there is not much left of the original tension of the character's will and inability to take action. This Hamlet simply seems to lack the will to do anything. On the other hand, however, Hawke himself offers us an explanation of the inaction: he argues that, despite a heavy history of being an irresolute man, Hamlet is not what he seems. Rather, Hamlet is, in fact, *decisive*, but also a thoughtful and decent human being who does not take lightly the idea of killing another human being.[139] Perhaps he appears to be too thoughtful, then – a thoughtful humanist too enmeshed in his *Weltschmerzt* to ooze a drop of action, it seems.

So, this Hamlet is grungy, yes, and thus good for the then contemporary world, but compare him with, say, Gibson the action hero and his interpretation of Hamlet, and we see how there is, indeed, something missing. What is more, the grungy Hamlet somehow seems belated, as the film is set in the year 2000, half a decade after the actual grunge wave faded away. This, then, somehow makes Hawke's Hamlet a dilettante-like character; not only is he stuck on watching old film footages of happier times, he is also stuck on representing a style and a subculture from the time when he actually was a teenager, not just an over-grown adolescent.

Like Hamlet of the original play, Almereyda's Hamlet is also something of an idealist. He does not find people worthy of trust, and has placed his dead father on a pedestal. Paul Cantor's description of the original play's Hamlet fits well into Almereyda's character as well:

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[138] *Hamlet*, 1:2:68-9.
[139] Hawke, in Almereyda 2000, xiv.

> Hamlet is thus characterized by a kind of absolutism. One can see this in the way he idealises the memory of his father into an image of perfection. . . . He has a kind of all-or-nothing attitude; if the world or people do not live up to his image of perfection, they are worthless to him.[140]

Further, there is an interesting comparison between the parallels of Hamlet. The social class of Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as the boys in *Dead Poets' Society* is similar to that of Prince Hamlet: they are all well-off, upper-class boys, who do not really need to do anything for their living. Though Almereyda's Hamlet is not a royal prince per se, he is a child of a wealthy business family. What is different, however, is that multimillion businesses are rarely passed down to sons, so even if Claudius had not come between Hamlet and his heritage, it is questionable whether this grungy and anti-globalization Hamlet would ever have taken over the family business. This is, of course, something quite essential in the original play; Hamlet has been preparing himself for the day he becomes a king and for bearing his responsibilities. Claudius, however, pops in between his succession, and the power slips out of Hamlet's hands: suddenly he finds himself in a situation where his role in the family is not clear anymore.

While the royal aspect is lost in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, the idea of social privilege is kept. Hamlet's social class enables his loss of mirth, in a sense, since he has nothing but time to dwell on his problems and roam around with his pixel-vision camera, making artsy documents. This, accordingly, is very much a phenomenon of the late 20th / early 21st century Western society, where large numbers of people are well-off enough for their offspring to do nothing at all, and so they need to come up with something to pass the time, be it artsy film-making or dilettante photographing.

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[140] Cantor, Paul A. *Landmarks of world literature – Shakespeare/Hamlet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 50.

However, regardless of how we may see Hawke as Hamlet, with personages like Hamlet such as he is presented in Almereyda's film, he does become somewhat more tangible, particularly for the less scholarly audience. After all, the anxiety young people seem to go through while seeking the meaning of things, and while feeling overshadowed by their elders, appears to be rather universal, and in this Hamlet is no exception. So, though the language in the film is the somewhat complex "Shakespearean English," it is still Almereyda's haughty and neurotic art student with a grungy ski cap and yellow shades that the contemporary audience can relate to somewhat better than, say, the tragic hero in tights played by Laurence Olivier. Or, as Holden Caulfield himself puts it in *The Catcher in the Rye*:

> You take Sir Laurence Olivier . . . I was anxious as hell to see it, too. But I didn't enjoy it much. I just don't see what's so marvelous about Sir Laurence Olivier, that's all. He has a terrific voice, and he's a helluva handsome guy, and he's very nice to watch when he's walking or dueling or something, but he wasn't at all the way D.B. said Hamlet was. He was too much like a goddam general, instead of a sad, screwed-up type guy.[141]

So, as a "screwed-up type guy" himself, Holden finds it hard to relate to a Hamlet played by Olivier. Yu Jin Ko points out that more often than not, Hamlets have been played by actors too old for the role, and consequently Hawke, at twenty-seven, was a good choice for the "annoying, infantile, and self-indulgent" Hamlet.[142]

5.2.2 Agent Cooper Meets Bob – The Rest of the Cast

Ethan Hawke is not the only actor in the film who adds a little something to his character. Fedderson and Richardson claim that casting actors with heavy roles behind them actually brings entropy, a certain kind of controlled randomness into the film:

> They enter attended by a cast of previous roles . . . Almereyda's *Hamlet* tries to minimize the entropic potential of these actors by using various strategies of

[141] Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1974, 123.
[142] Yu Jin Ko. "'The Mousetrap' and Remembrance in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*." *Shakespeare Bulletin*. Vol 23, Issue 4 (2005), 21.

> containment: e.g. acting style, adherence to script . . . Thus, while the film minimizes the significations that attend these actors, these infiltrating significations cannot be, nor are they to be, completely excluded . . . These characters, while minimally entropic, remain palimpsests.[143]

Ophelia's part is played by Julia Stiles, and one could argue that she, as well, brings along certain connotations, though in her case the baggage is not as heavy as with Hawke. Stiles was a rather regular face in (teen) movies of the 1990s, and starred for instance in *Ten Things I Hate About You,*[144] a sappy teen version of Shakespeare's *The Taming of The Shrew*, and after *Hamlet* Stiles went on to reinterpret Desdemona in *O,*[145] a teen version of Shakespeare's play *Othello*. Stiles's Ophelia is, consequently, quite the teen-queen, infantilized by her father and mistreated by the absent boyfriend.

In addition, casting Bill Murray and Kyle McLachlan gives an interesting sidekick to the roles of Claudius and Polonius, respectively. Murray is best known for his clownish roles: he has staggered in front of the camera as the weatherman Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*,[146] as Frank Cross in *Scrooged*[147] and as Bob in *What About Bob?*[148] – all characters you would not trust your house with. His Polonius is, accordingly, foolish and officious, gullible even, quite like in the original play. McLachlan, then, is best known for his roles in David Lynch's work:

> The affectless postmodern irony that McLachlan brings to the simultaneously naïve and knowing, innocent and morally compromised characters he portrays in *Blue Velvet* [149] and in *Twin Peaks*[150] invests his Claudius with a very timely ethical camouflage.[151]

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[143] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 156.
[144] Directed by Gil Junger, 1999.
[145] Directed by Tim Blake Nelson, 2001.
[146] Directed by Harold Ramis, 1993.
[147] Directed by Richard Donner, 1988.
[148] Directed by Frank Oz, 1991.
[149] 1986.
[150] 1990-1991.
[151] Fedderson and Richardson 2004, 158.

There is, indeed, something of Agent Cooper from *Twin Peaks* and Jeffrey Beaumont from *Blue Velvet* in McLachlan's Claudius; an air of simultaneous happy-go-lucky attitude with an understanding of the darker side of life, all mixed in a cunning, yet somehow gullible personality.

Further, Lanier argues that it shows metacinematic genius to have cast Sam Shepard to play the Ghost of the old Hamlet, since he is more often identified with the modern American theatre and with the critique of the myth of the happy American family created by the media.[152] Mark Thornton Burnett, on the other hand, points out that since Shepard is better known as a dramatist, he can be seen as a representative of an older technology used to write and perform theatre. Consequently, it is possible to connect him with the young Hamlet as the representative of the new technology in filmmaking: "...in the same moment as he indulges in 'ghostings' of earlier Shakespeares and Shakespearean traditions, Almereyda imagines Hamlet as a postmodern progeny of a playwright."[153]

Gertrud is played by perhaps a little less known Diane Venora, and though her baggage of previous roles is not as heavy as that of other members of the cast, she does have a strong background in acting in Shakespeare plays onstage. In 1983, she starred in a production of *Hamlet* directed by Joseph Papp, at the New York Shakespeare Festival; curiously enough, she had the leading role, and was consequently the first woman to play the role at the festival.[154]

Further, a political commentary is present in Almereyda's Horatio and Marcella. The pair is played by Karl Geary and Paula Malcomson: Geary was born in Dublin,

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[152] Lanier 2002, 170.
[153] Burnett Thornton, Mark. " 'To Hear and See the Matter': Communicating Technologies in Michael Almereyda's Hamlet." *Cinema Journal*. Vol 42, Issue 3 (2003), 65.
[154] http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0893204/bio.

while Malcomson hails from Belfast,[155] so this could easily be seen as a comment on the situation in the divided country; perhaps Almereyda wants to comment on the (im)possible peace or unification in Ireland. Similarly, Marcellus turning into Marcella also flips the traditional gender roles of the play upside down, and in contrast to the film's Ophelia, she has all the liberties of a modern woman.[156] In fact, there is an interesting translation of the original play: traditionally Hamlet is seen somehow to envy Horatio, who is no "passion's slave,"[157] able to lead a life much calmer than that of Hamlet's – "Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man / As e'er my conversation cop'd withal."[158] In Almereyda's film, however, Hamlet does clearly admire not only Horatio's trustworthy appearance, but also, and even more so, the stable and caring relationship he has with Marcella, since such a relationship, it seems, is out of Hamlet's reach.

5.2.3 *She Holds the Hand that Holds Her Down* – The Merry-Go-Round of the Characters

Overall, Almereyda's characters seem to co-exist in a dichotomy between the older and the younger generation, as the two groups do not seem to be able to connect with each other. If we think of the general idea of the Generation X as people who were – or are – part of the grunge culture, stereotypically frustrated and cynical young people who on the one hand feel overshadowed by the preceding generations, and on the other question their parents' values, Hamlet's character fits perfectly in the picture.

The generational gap is emphasized in the way Ophelia, and even Hamlet at times, is infantilized. In fact, this Ophelia is a rather controversial character: she is a seemingly independent woman, as she has her own apartment and she works as a

[155] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171359/.
[156] Fedderson and Richardson 2004, 159.
[157] *Hamlet*, 3:2:72.
[158] *Hamlet*, 3:2:54-5.

photographer, but she is, as said, constantly patronized by the men in the film. Despite all supposed signs of independence, she is constantly infantilized not only by her father Polonius, but also by her brother Laertes, both of whom fail to recognize her maturity. Polonius does her shoelaces, as if she was too young to do it herself, and brings her bright colored helium balloons, the kind that small children have for their birthdays,[159] while Laertes, as the older brother, disapproves of her relationship with Hamlet. Moreover, there is an overall feeling of discomfort in the family; it is seems that they simply do not trust one another. Similarly the Ghost addresses Hamlet with some "serious hearing," as if he was telling a ten-year-old to listen carefully what Daddy has to say. All this boils down to the fact that the "unflinching face of postmodern patriarchy belittles them."[160] Moreover, for much of the film the relationship between Hamlet and his mother is much like that of a raging 15-year-old teenager and a mother "who just does not understand."

In fact, particularly the controversial status of Ophelia tells us something of the problematics of modernizing an old play: often in these modern versions of Shakespeare, Fedderson and Richardson argue, entropy is introduced due to shifts in ideology. Consequently, some features of Renaissance ideologies are so much at odds with the modern sense of reality that they have to be edited; sometimes, however, "when the early modern ideology is so central to elements of plot and character that a contemporary equivalent or equivalents has to be found."[161] And so we get the controversial Ophelia, an independent woman who still represents an ideology "that enforces the subservice and dependence of women and typically confines them to the domestic sphere."[162]

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[159] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 159.
[160] Burnett 2003, 56.
[161] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 159.
[162] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 158.

5.2.4 *This Is Not for You* – The Target Audience?

A further point to be made of the importance of the cast and translation of the film is to consider who it is aimed at, that is, who are in the target audience of a given film. The language in Almereyda's film is the original Elizabethan English, so this might lure older, more scholarly audience to watch the film. However, with the obvious hints to the grungy underground culture, along with the young actors, the pendulum swings towards the younger audience.

In fact, while the film could be of interest to a rather wide scope of audience, the commercial trailer seems to suggest otherwise: the trailer appears to be aimed at a rather limited scope of viewers, as it is much more Hollywood-like than the film itself. It is like a high-speed music video, and while the film is filled with old language, the trailer is careful not to let on that the films is, indeed, spoken in Elizabethan English. In fact, there is an air of trying to create an image of a film genre completely different from what the film actually represents. In the background of the trailer we get sporadic phrases, spoken with a deep male voice, interrupted by the sound of gunshots. The tagline is pompous – "Now trust is impossible, passion is on the rise and revenge [gun shots] is in the air." We see more guns than the film actually appears to include, and on top of everything, though somehow appropriately, David Bowie's "Heroes" starts playing in the background while the voice introduces the actors in the film.

Consequently, then, a film with such a trailer is likely to interest the younger audience, even the ones prone to watch action films only, but at the same time, it is likely to rise disinterest among the traditional Shakespeare audience. All this is also linked with the choice of actors: as already stated, Ethan Hawke was sure to interest the grungier audience, and "fool" them to watch Shakespeare. Similarly then, for

example, Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* was a sure hit among the fans of Mel Gibson, though the role of Hamlet differed completely from his earlier work.

5.3 *Makes Much More Sense to Live in the Present Tense* – The Changing Interpretation of an Adaptation

The concept of time leads to another problem in the adaptation: how could a modern version of a 400-year-old play even begin to try to stay true to the original? Echoing Stam's arguments on long-concentrated texts receiving a new meaning on page 11, the more time has passed from the original text's first appearance, the more likely is the reinterpretation of the story through the values of the present. We tend to see especially cultural objects through events and phenomena of the contemporary world, and readily mold the "deeper" meaning of a film into fitting our perception of the world. We may even read too much into a work of art and see things that are not necessarily in it. In Almereyda's work, both "original" and contemporary issues are present, or rather, they collide and coincide: the major problems, that is, the question of authenticity and the problem of choosing what and who to be are relevant in both Shakespeare's and Almereyda's *Hamlet*.

5.3.1 September 11th, 2001

Consequently, since our understanding of cultural objects changes over time, we may start to interpret these objects differently, according to contemporary phenomena. We in fact often tint our interpretations of earlier texts – whether we intend to do so or not – by our experiences with later texts, and this is true also of visual texts.[163] For instance, then, Fedderson and Richardson discuss the perception of Almereyda's *Hamlet* in the aftermath of 9/11. They argue that the reading of the film situated in

[163] Owens 2003, 21.

corporate New York changed drastically after the attacks, and claim that here, in a morbid way, the simulacra actually preceded the real, as the events of catastrophic films foreshadowed the events of 9/11.[164] Accordingly, they seem to argue that we use these cultural objects to process and understand the events of the world that surrounds us.

> It is now a critical commonplace to observe that as readers and as writers, we are always positioned in history and read and write within the horizons of intelligibility . . . that we construct out of the materials history makes available to us. We also recognize that these horizons of intelligibility are not transcendent; they are subject to history. Events can alter how we read and, thus, alter the sense we will make of cultural objects . . . The transfiguration of the Manhattan cityscape which followed September 11, 2001, re-contextualizes and overwrites cultural objects, like Almereyda's film, which circulate in its wake. The lens through which the audience now views the film has been forcibly widened.[165]

Fedderson and Richardson, too, point out that the overall gloomy feeling of the *mise-en-scène* contributes to the fact that there is an overwhelming feeling of things gone terribly wrong. After 9/11, however, they seem to argue, the threat does not only come from within: the rot is not only in the state of America, but comes also from the outside.[166]

It is, of course, debatable whether our reading of a film should be molded to fit contemporary phenomena, but the example of Almereyda's *Hamlet* and 9/11 does give an idea of how our conceptions of these cultural objects are prone to change. However, this kind of reasoning may easily make us read into things that the film never intended to discuss. Fedderson and Richardson do take the matter quite far, when they talk about the change in the significance of the cityscape after the attacks of 9/11; they claim that now, we in fact watch Almereyda's *Hamlet* "waiting for the planes to crash into the skyscrapers, ushering in a new, perhaps post apocalyptic,

[164] Fedderson & Richardson 2003, 164.
[165] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 151-2.
[166] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 152-3.

era."[167] Seeing the film like this shows how differently people in different cultural environments observe things. To claim that we now watch the film waiting for the planes to crash hails from a state of mind that a New Yorker, or an American, who perhaps even witnessed the attacks, may have had after 9/11, but it is something less tangible for, say, the Scandinavian viewer. For people outside the United States, the collapse of the Twin Towers was surely a shocking event of terrorism, but the cultural meaning of the towers that defined the New York skyline and the loss of lives there was something that may be more difficult for an outsider to understand. Nevertheless, at the end of the day Almereyda's film is very much about the things that hit New York, as well as most of the world, for that matter, after 9/11: paranoia and surveillance did become a part of everyday life.

In addition, choosing New York as the *mise-en-scène* has a further political aspect to watching the film in the light of the events of 9/11. Even though the Fortinbras sub-plot is minimized in the film – we only see him on TV screens and on newspaper and magazine cowers – it is still very much present. In the play, Fortinbras is the ultimate man of action, unafraid of going abroad to fight over a worthless piece of land, for "a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name."[168] So, the character of Fortinbras is all about power and international politics: with a little simplification, one could argue that at least indirectly it was the aspiration to power and rule over international politics that brought on the World Trade Center attacks. New York (and the Pentagon, of course) was the one to suffer the "collateral damage" of the international politics of the United States, as their fight over a "little patch of ground" backfired. While Marcellus questions Denmark's preparations for war and

[167] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 160.
[168] *Hamlet*, 344:18-19.

the point of standing in guard in the original play,[169] similarly many of the U.S. soldiers sent to Iraq appear to question the point of fighting there. After all, with a little exaggeration, the United States is on a mission in the Middle East over a cause that sometimes seems to be an odd race to power. So, there is some irony in situating the ultimate revenge story in a city that later became the landmark of revenge.

5.3.2 *Speaking as a Child of the 90s* – Contemporary Politics

While things that happen after the making of a film may mold our perception of it, also the political environment in which the film is first made should be acknowledged. Almereyda's anti-capitalist *Hamlet*, for instance, was released shortly after the first wider-scale anti-globalization demonstrations took place in Seattle, when, in 1999, the World Trade Organization had its large-scale meeting in the city. Since Almereyda's *Hamlet* is also about resistance to corporatism and globalization, the connection to the demonstrations in Seattle at the turn of the millennium is rather obvious.[170] And, still sticking on to the grunge aspect of the film, it was, indeed, Seattle where the whole culture first hailed from. Also, Almereyda uses images of burning oil fields, which is, of course, an obvious reference to the Gulf War of the early 1990s. Here, again, we can link the Fortinbras sub-plot into Almereyda's work: the Gulf War, too, was a prime example of how the will to have power and rule over international politics may lead into the loss of lives. Consequently, we also get an image of Bill Clinton making his pompous State of the Union Speech on TV, yet another reference to the politics of the 90s.

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[169] "Why this same strict and most observant watch / So nightly toils the subject of the land, / And why such a daily cast of brazen cannon / And foreign mart for implements of war, / Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task / Does not divide the Sunday from the week." *Hamlet*, 1:1:74-9.
[170] Walker 2003, 3.

There is also, as already stated, the Irish situation present in the characters of Horatio and Marcella: Burnett argues that Almereyda discusses the radical politics of Ireland by linking Wittenberg, "the sixteenth-century breeding ground for radical religion, with Dublin, a twentieth century seat of radical politics."[171] Burnet, too, sees the Irish couple as an allusion to the peace process, though not only in Ireland, but in a more domestic way as well: "And because Horatio hails form the south of Ireland and Marcella from the north, political unification is presented, via heterosexual coupling, as one solution to familial conflict."[172] They, apparently, stand also for the peace within the family, which seems to be as hard to achieve in Hamlet's family as it is in the politics of Ireland.

Another curious detail in Almereyda's *Hamlet* and the political innuendos entailed in it is a scene where a Colombian flag is seen in the background, just for a second or two, and in a seemingly unimportant scene. The flag could of course be there for no reason at all, but given Colombia's political situation, the flag could be seen as an allusion to the disastrous and unstable politics of a corrupt banana republic. Torn by guerrilla war, corruption and a thriving drug industry, which mainly sees to the demand of the United States, Colombia is, indeed, a prime example of the flip side of the globalization coin.

Apparently then Almereyda's *Hamlet* can be read as a rather political film, but it is not only Almereyda's doings, as the play itself gives space to political discussion. For instance, also Olivier's *Hamlet* is seen as a political statement, representing the situation of its time. Olivier chose to cut some essential characters and scenes, and so there is no Rosencrantz, Guildenstern or Fortinbras in his version of the play, and this, Guntner argues, had some political issues behind it:

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[171] Burnett 2003, 61.
[172] Ibid.

> Although the omission of Fortinbras as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern excises a strong political element from the play, Olivier's decision was in line with the dominant political opinion of the day, i.e. that the rise of fascism, World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, were due to delayed political action on the part of France, Great Britain and the United States. By Cutting Fortinbras and coding the visual strategy of the film as he does, Olivier suggests that this is a circular pattern of history doomed to be repeated if we do not act against injustice.[173]

5.4 The *Mise-en-Scène* – Why Choose New York?

Perhaps one of the most interesting questions in reviewing Almereyda's adaptation of *Hamlet* is the *mise-en-scène*. Almereyda's New York is an austere, melancholic and sterile place, where essentially no elements of the natural world or nature itself are present. It is a city of cold business and global capitalism, and the characters live in the shadow of the massive skyscrapers; the surfaces are cold and of chrome and glass, all of which contribute to the sterile and oppressive feeling of the film. What is more, many of the scenes are shot from a ground angle upwards, so that the oppressiveness of the skyscrapers is even more emphasized. All this contributes to the feeling of *film noir*, a genre Almereyda pays homage to, in the wake of Olivier's equally gloomy and oppressive Elsinore, and it is *film noir* that is the film's most important generic forebear, with

> its use of the city as a character; its images of an oppressive, urban night-world of blue-lit neon, chrome, and asphalt; its emphasis on systematic corruption, surveillance, and violence behind the façade of benign normalcy; and its characterization of the protagonist as a fallen innocent who struggles against his own impotence, alienation, and complicity with the system he resists.[174]

But apart from fitting well to the concept of *film noir*, why choose the contemporary, corporate and inhumane New York as the vehicle for *Hamlet*, to discuss the human condition and dwell on the problem of authenticity? Or, why discuss the corporate

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[173] Guntner 2005, 118.
[174] Lanier 2002, 169.

capitalism through an old play like *Hamlet*? Burnett argues that by adapting *Hamlet* and situating the play in New York, Almereyda grabs hold of an opportunity to address "peculiarly millennial apprehensions and anxieties."[175] By doing so, he brings his own "distinctive preoccupations – a fascination with generational alienation, an attention to the effects of urban existence, and a yearning for an unadulterated and authentic subjectivity" to the trajectory of Shakespeare films such as Aki Kaurismäki's *Hamlet Goes Business* (1987) and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991).[176]

5.4.1 The Tradition of New York as a *Mise-en-Scène*

Choosing contemporary New York as the stomping-ground for his Hamlet, Almereyda "avails himself, first, of resonant psychological/cinematic narratives with which the city is popularly identified."[177] Burnett gives examples of films such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* (1981) and Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) that all establish the city both as a symbolic prison and as a "breeding ground for psychotic neuroses and material acquisitiveness,"[178] which is, after all, what also Almereyda's work is filled with. All four films revolve in one way or another around the line between sanity and insanity, and the idea of escaping the city or the anxiety the protagonists feel in it is very much present. In *Taxi Driver*, an unstable Vietnam War veteran drives the night-time taxi shifts "in a city whose perceived decadence and sleaze feeds his urge to violently lash out,"[179] while the tagline for *Escape From New York* was **"***1997. New York City is*

[175] Burnett 2003, 48.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Burnett 2003, 48.
[179] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075314/.

now a maximum security prison. Breaking out is impossible. Breaking in is insane."[180] The infamous *American Psycho* tells the story of a psychopathic Wall Street man who spends his nights serial killing around the city. Though Almereyda's Hamlet is not quite that desperate in his neurosis, the connection Burnett draws between the anxious protagonists of these films is a convincing one, since they do influence Almereyda's construction of Hamlet, and even more so the City itself. And as Burnett concludes, given the fact that Hamlet is, above everything else, a rather disoriented and decentered man, in search of his own path and some subjective coherence, the streets of New York do offer a good setting for some soul searching.[181] After all, even Holden Caulfield spent his days and nights roaming the streets of New York while trying to make sense of the world.

5.4.2 The Architecture and the Melancholy of the Big City

The very architecture of New York and the connotations it brings are also essential in the way we observe the *mise-en-scène* in Almereyda's film: "New York represents, *par excellence*, urban phenomenon."[182] Paul Goldberger, the Architecture Critic for *The New Yorker,* discusses the role of the skyscrapers in the NYC skyline, and concludes that they, in fact, have in a way taken the role of churches.

> Before there were skyscrapers, the horizon in most cities was dominated by church steeples. (In New York, the tallest thing was Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church, built in 1846.) The earliest skyscrapers wrested control of the skyline from God and gave it to Mammon, where it has pretty much remained. In 1913, a fawning minister called the Woolworth Building the "cathedral of commerce," in celebration of the triumph of corporate power that Cass Gilbert's lyrical Gothic skyscraper represented.[183]

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[180] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082340/.
[181] Burnett 2003, 50.
[182] Burnett 2003, 49.
[183] Goldberger, Paul. "Building Plans". *The New Yorke*r. September 24, 2001. www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924crsk_skyline

Both with churches and skyscrapers the architectural height suggests aspiration, power and transcendence, and so the connection between the secular and the divine was apparent as early as 1913; similarly, Julia Kristeva linked the Twin Towers in NYC with the worship of capitalism by calling them "Notre Dame L'Argent."[184] All these descriptions fit well to Almereyda's New York: the State of Denmark has been turned into the enormous and faceless Denmark Corporation, power is aspired to and transcendentalism is present in the Ghost's character. Similarly, the life of the "royal" family of the film is dictated by business – and in Hamlet's case, the rebellion and resistance towards all this.

Burnett goes on to link the "structure-end-skin extravaganza of 'signature buildings', coned towers, and disconnected historical references"[185] with the anonymity, melancholia and madness of the film: in such a fragmentary landscape the inhabitant can only be "angst-ridden and isolated."[186] New York, it seems, is a perfect place to be alone. Consequently, also Baudrillard asks why anyone would live in New York in the first place, since there is no relationship between the people there. There is only inner electricity, which results from the simple fact of different people being crowded together; it is a magical sensation of contiguity and appeal for an artificial centrality. There is, indeed no rational reason to be there, except for the absolute ecstasy of being crowded together.[187] Baudrillard continues with his ideas on New York, arguing that, despite there being no relationship between the people there, there is nothing as intense and vibrant as the streets of New York; people roam the streets, sometimes aggressive and sometimes indifferent, and the only obligation they have is

[184] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 160.
[185] Burnett 2003, 48.
[186] Burnett 2003, 49.
[187] Baudrillard, Jean. *Amerikka*. Trans. Tiina Arppe. Helsinki: Loki-Kirjat, 1991, 33-34.

to produce the ongoing script of the city.[188] Yet another description of such New York is to be found in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*:

> New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how well he came to know its neighbourhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind. . . New York was the nowhere he had built around himself. . .[189]

So, living in New York, it seems, is all about being alone with everyone, and this is, again, also Hamlet's problem: he is unable to connect with others and lives in isolation – for him, the city appears "as organized only around a 'schizoid arrangement'," [190] as Rem Koolhaas calls it:

> In fact the schizoid arrangement of thematic planes implies an architectural strategy for planning the interior of the skyscraper, which has become autonomous through the lobotomy: the vertical schism, a systematic exploitation of the deliberate disconnection between stories.[191]

Abbate draws a parallel also between Baudrillard's Los Angeles and Almereyda's New York. Both cities are contemporary American "ideal cities," where 20 million people coexist, but live in an anonymous state of complete conceit and disconnection:

> All around, the tinted glass facades of buildings are like faces. Frosted surfaces. It is as though there were no one inside the buildings, as if there were no one behind the faces. And there really is no one.[192]

Given Almereyda's representation of Hamlet as a " decentered soul striving through cognitive mapping for a subjective coherence,"[193] that is, as a man trying to make sense of his life through his pixel-visioned footages (discussed more thoroughly on pp. 73-74), it is easy to see the attraction of New York and its "cinematographic

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[188] Baudrillard 1991, 38.
[189] Auster, Paul. "City of Glass". *The New York Trilogy*. Kent: Faber and Faber, 1992, 4.
[190] Burnett 2003, 49.
[191] Koolhaas 1992, in Klingmann, Anna. "The Real Real: Capitalism and Schizophrenia in the Urban Landscape." *TransReal*, 2000, 10. www.klingmann.com/pdf/TheRealReal.pdf.
[192] Baudrillard, quoted in Abbate 2004, 83.
[193] Burnett 2003, 50.

possibilities" as a location for a film like that of Almereyda's.[194] Almereyda himself describes New York as an extremely sinister city, a complete opposite of the "Woody Allen grim New York" that appears as "one huge glittering mirror reflecting light and reflecting images."[195]

5.5 *Denmark's a Prison* – The Isolating Chrome, Glass and Technology

Along with the sterile representation of the city filled with reflecting and mirroring surfaces, there is the overwhelming amount of technology, and particularly technology associated with surveillance, that shapes the mood of the film. Corruption and surveillance both contribute to the prison-like feeling of the film, but the same feeling is, of course, present in the play as well. In fact, Knights argues that Shakespeare's Denmark is, by definition, a place where "any decent man would feel himself in prison."[196] Echoing Baudrillard's concerns on the collapse of human relationships, Almereyda's use of hard transparent surfaces seems to suggest that connecting not only with others, but also with the self, is directly related to the collapse of "organic social constituencies."[197] Consequently, the unyielding glass surfaces personify the "unfeeling quality of the film's human relations."[198] In fact, the only occasion in which these surfaces shatter and appear vulnerable is the scene where Polonius is shot in the eye, through a mirror.

Consequently, surveillance is not entirely Almereyda's creation, since *Hamlet* is a play where most characters are either being spied on or spying on someone, and so the presence of surveillance devices to create a sense of imprisonment is, in its

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[194] Ibid.
[195] Abbate 2004, 83-4.
[196] Knights 1966, 183.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid.

morbidity, quite fitting.[199] Burnett quotes Edward W. Soja on the role of the city in the "imprisonment" of its inhabitants: "Every city is a carceral city, a collection of surveillant nodes designed to impose a particular model of conduct and disciplinary adherence on its inhabitants."[200] Apparently, then, the cities create hostile and oppressive environments, where people are made to submit to a certain amount of surveillance. Even the very skyscrapers are much like towers of a prison, surveying everything around them.[201]

5.5.1 *All Along the Watchtower* – Hamlet's Panopticon

Essentially every scene of the film is impregnated with some kind of an electronic device: there are phones, faxes, computers, TVs and surveillance cameras; some scenes are even seen through the lens of a surveillance camera. All this, consequently, contributes to the oppressive Orwellian feeling of the film. When everything is surveyed and spied on, a system of "permanent, exhaustive [and] omnipresent surveillance capable of making all visible"[202] finds its realization and justification in the panopticon, a prison-like structure that Foucault describes as being "like so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible."[203] Hamlet's angst, then, hails partly from the desire to escape this panopticon he finds himself in; he is trapped in a situation where he is obliged by the promise to avenge his father's murder, and in a family he does not want to be in.

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[199] Spying is evident in many scenes of the play: for instance, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes; the King uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to receive information of Hamlet; Polonius hides in a closet to eavesdrop the discussion the Hamlet and his mother, and Hamlet and Ophelia's private discussion is listened to as well. Ironically enough, Polonius's fascination with spying kills him, as he is stabbed through arras where he is hiding, spying on others.
[200] Burnett 2003, 51.
[201] Jess, Carolyn. "The Promethean Apparatus: Michel Almereyda's *Hamlet* as Cinematic Allegory." *Literature Film Quarterly*. Vol 32, Issue 2, 2004, 95.
[202] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1991, 214.
[203] Foucault 1991, 200.

The walls of New York seem to be caving in, but there seems to be no escaping the panopticon.

Along with surveillance cameras, also wires function as a tool for spying or otherwise controlling the characters; we see wires from Ophelia getting wired with microphones for her conversation with Hamlet, right up to the end where Hamlet and Laertes's moves are controlled by the wires counting hits in the fencing match. Burnett argues that in fact the characters are regarded as counters to be reckoned with and calculated: "they constitute the inmates of the technical panopticon."[204] What is more, Almereyda even has Rosencrantz read the technology magazine *Wired* on the plane to England.

The scene where Hamlet actually utters his concerns of living in a prison – "Denmark's a prison"[205] – takes place in a bar with loud music in the background. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, supposedly friends of Hamlet, show up and start trying to squeeze out the true reason of Hamlet's foul mood. The scene, with the oppressive interior of the bar, adds up to the imprisoning feeling of the film, as if the nightlife was something Hamlet feels he has to take part in, or rather, something he and his generation are – again – trapped in. What is more, the continuous questions that the intruding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep asking seem to corner Hamlet. "Hamlet stands, feeling suddenly, desperately trapped. He glances around the bar. Everyone looks insidious and unreal,"[206] says the screenplay. Indeed, the initial joy of seeing his old friends vanishes, as Hamlet starts to doubt they are there for a particular reason, running an errand for the King.

The concept of imprisonment is obvious in other physical spaces of the film as well. More often than not we encounter Almereyda's Hamlet in narrow, oppressive

[204] Burnett 2003, 54.
[205] *Hamlet*, 2:2:243.
[206] Almereyda 2000, 53.

and enclosed spaces, and, ironically enough, there is always an exit sign at the end of these corridor-like spaces – the video store, the laundromat and the airplane, to point out a few, are such spaces. Similarly, the swirling architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, as well as the revolving drums of the laundromat are, as Burnett argues, represented as extremely repressive.[207] In fact, even at the risk of reading too much into the film, a curious detail regarding swirls and circles is Ophelia's hair. As the film grows closer to its end, and as Ophelia gets closer to going insane, her hair gets more braided and tangled, and when she finally does go mad, in the "swirling architecture" of the Guggenheim Museum, her hair is all made into little swirling knots of braids. Her mind, then, is in swirls and knots as well, and her choice to escape the oppressive world around is to jump to her death into a fountain in the museum. We are left with an image of her floating in the fountain, with Hamlet's letters around her.

With all this considered, it is easy to see that also Almereyda's Denmark *is* a prison. There is, indeed, something wrong in the state of Denmark, and even more so in Hamlet's life. The corrupt family with its corrupt business is suffocating Hamlet, but there seems to be no way out of the situation, though supposed exits are offered to him; Hamlet is unable to take action and take advantage of these possibilities to exit. Imprisonment is everywhere: "Almereyda's somber suggestion is that one prison is indistinguishable from, and blurs imperceptibly into, another."[208] A clever allusion to all this is to have the gravedigger at the cemetery sing Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," as identifying with Dylan's lyrics seems rather natural for Hamlet, considering his situation:

[207] Burnett 2003, 53.
[208] Burnett 2003, 53.

> "There must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief
> "There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief.
> Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
> None of them along the line know what any of it is worth."

The watchtower could, of course, be linked with the watchtower of Hamlet's panopticon, and of any watchtower in a place where one is constantly surveyed. Lanier claims that this "throwaway allusion" of using Dylan's lyrics would also show Almereyda's own desire to find a way out of the "wraparound media system to which his Hamlet and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* have been subjected, some cinematic mode of escape, evasion, or resistance that is not always appropriated by that system."[209] Quoting John Fiske, Lanier points out how the contemporary popular culture is in fact built upon an ultimately necessary contradiction. While the works of popular culture unavoidably carry the interests that produce them in the first place, they are also, by definition, popular, and so bear the same resistant line of "force that engage inchoate forms of discontent and utopianism."[210] This idea, of course, fits well in the use of lyrics of Dylan. Further, Hamlet may well think that Claudius is the businessman drinking his wine, as he did, indeed, rob Hamlet of his possibilities of succession.

However, using Dylan's song might have a deeper reading still: Burnett reminds us that Dylan was in fact involved in the burgeoning civil rights movement, and this is something Hamlet can be linked to:

> As the gravedigger philosophizes about too "much confusion," "businessmen" who "drink my wine," and "plowmen" who "dig my earth," one is reminded of the original circumstances of the song and, in particular, the rumor that Dylan, following a protracted withdrawal from public life, was the victim of a CIA assassination attempt. It therefore seems as if Hamlet (who returns to Elsinore/New York having frustrated the murderous designs on him) is conceived of as a latter-day folk celebrity.[211]

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[209] Lanier 2002, 179-180.
[210] Lanier 2002, 180.
[211] Burnett 2003, 61.

If not anything else, Dylan was a rebel of his own time, and this is something for Hamlet to relate to.

A further point to be made out of the gravedigger's song is the traditional way of seeing the encounter with the gravedigger in *Hamlet*: usually it is regarded as the first time Hamlet meets his linguistic match. However, in Almereyda's adaptation, as Burnett argues, the gravedigger's singing is paralleled with Hamlet's filmmaking; the gravedigger, being here allowed "aural sentiments of an openly political cast, Hamlet's visual protests are momentarily overshadowed," as Hamlet is still, despite the "visual disappearance of his interlocutor… confronted with a wittily destabilizing adversary."[212] In short, the gravedigger singing a song from the sixties is one of the clever intertextualities with multiple readings in the film.

5.5.2 *Take My Hand, Not My Picture* – Technology Instead of Relationships

The fact that Almereyda sets his *Hamlet* in modern surroundings allows him to harness technology as a new way to communicate some important matters in the play – such as the lack of mutual bonding between family members – as well as contemporary matters. Almereyda's Hamlet lives in a world where, by definition, technology replaces language: "it [language] can be taken over by technology and ventriloquized."[213] Burnett gives an example of a scene located in a cab:

> ..the voice-over of Eartha Kitt intones in a taxi that "cats have nine lives – meoooowrr – but unfortunately you have only one"; here, a warning about the dangers of riding unbuckled in an automobile are mediated through the disembodied traces of a faded comic strip icon.[214]

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[212] Ibid.
[213] Burnett 2003, 54.
[214] Burnett 2003, 54-5. While Burnett makes a good point about Eartha Kitt, he is off-track with Kitt's identity. Kitt is no faded comic strip icon, but a singer and an actress who played Catwoman in the Batman TV series, and was, accordingly, referred to as "Sex Kitten". Despite having missed the irony of a sex kitten telling Hamlet to buckle up, Burnett does prove his point of language taken over by technological reproductions.

Another good example of technology taking over is the scene where Hamlet has to rewrite the letter that will send Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to their deaths. While in the play it is a laborious task to rewrite the letter – "A baseness to write fair, and labour'd much"[215] – in the film it becomes a mere matter of deleting and retyping words on a laptop. This, consequently, can be seen as "yet another corporate instrument of corporate power."[216]

Almereyda's Hamlet does not only take advantage of technology when needed, but rather, he appears to be addicted to the technology that surrounds him. His TV set is constantly turned on, regardless of what he is doing – sleeping, eating or meditating. He observes the world through his video camera and rather than having the people close to him physically near, he prefers observing them on video footages. Technology appears to be some sort of an extension, as if it was a natural, yet unnatural part of his body. His pixel-vision video camera is constantly documenting what is happening around him, and so, as Abbate claims, he fails to establish any real networks of human associations, or to develop any epistemic skills. "…rather, he finds himself disconnected from the world, displaced into a fake ontology, a narrow and solipsistic existential dimension."[217] In fact, Abbate argues that the prison Hamlet is trapped in is not Denmark as such, but the very monitors he finds himself in.[218] He is knee-deep in technology and cannot find a way to the natural world. In a way, then, it is Hamlet himself who is creating the prison he cannot escape from.

Accordingly, this is one of the major problems Almereyda's Hamlet has: technology isolates him from the rest of the (natural) world, and from human relationships. On the other hand, however, Hamlet, while trying to create an art of

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[215] *Hamlet*, 5:2:34.
[216] Lanier 2002, 174.
[217] Abbate 2004, 83.
[218] Ibid.

defiance via film, creates a second self: through his camera, he can "record his otherwise-unspoken sense of loss, alienation, and despair,"[219] which he then can play to himself in the form of video soliloquies. In the play the soliloquies function like a vehicle for the viewer or the reader to enter Hamlet's mind, or, like Shapiro puts it:

> We are all that's left. Maybe the great secret of the soliloquies is not their inwardness so much as their outwardness, their essay-like capacity to draw us into an intimate relationship with the speaker and see the world through his eyes.[220]

In Almereyda's *Hamlet*, however, the soliloquies seem to work in an opposite way. Certainly they are there to let the viewer see what is going on in Hamlet's mind, but even more so they seem to work as a way for Hamlet himself to make sense of what is going on. Though not all, most of the soliloquies are indeed seen through Hamlet's video clips, and it is there that his efforts to understand everything is particularly evident, as he is rewinding and fast-forwarding the clips. In a way, then, Hamlet needs to alienate even himself to be able to process his feelings, to see and understand what is inside his mind; so, despite its isolating effect, technology does give Hamlet some means to try to deal with difficult issues. Nevertheless, the black-and-white footage he makes of his soliloquies is more like a sad reminder of his alienation and irresoluteness. Abbate claims that they are "valuable for their evanescence, records that Hamlet struggles to put to use when, in his first attempt to murder Claudius"[221] he plays the footage to get courage to go through with the plan, spurring himself into "taking arms" against the "sea of troubles."[222] Further, Katherine Rowe argues that the emphasis of Hamlet's video soliloquies is in fact the editorial process Hamlet goes through with them:

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[219] Lanier 2002, 172.
[220] Shapiro 2005, 334.
[221] Lanier 2002, 174.
[222] Abbate 2002, 174.

> There is no possibility of knowing the past in this film except through captured images processed by the self. The opportunity to process in this intimate way makes these traces more than simulacra. Hamlet forges an authentic connection to the past, if not a perfect one.[223]

So, the general consequences of mass media and a society impregnated with technology seem to be melancholy, introversion and most of all loneliness. Abbate, too, links these essential themes of the play with the film's millennial anxieties:

> The film uses the play's essential motif of Hamlet's quest – his search for proof of his uncle's crime, for moral transparency, for true mutuality, for a definite answer to the question of existence – in order to address an end-of-millennium anxiety regarding the collapse of human relationships and the growth of personal alienation in the media-driven world of hi-tech communications.[224]

This seems to fit Almereyda's Hamlet: he is so completely lost with himself and his feelings that he simply does not know how to handle it all, who to believe and trust. While trying to understand all this, Hamlet is also desperate to find his place in the cultural sphere where he tries to exist as a film-maker and a human being, within the simultaneously confining and enabling technology.[225] Everything, it seems, is out of his control. In a world where even the boundaries of art and everyday life are blurred and feelings are dealt with through technology, Burnett argues, it is no wonder that the individual "should be constructed as disoriented, at the mercy of floating signifiers, simulations, and imitations."[226] What follows from such a state of man is a psychological standstill, a feeling of such a strong dislocation in which the human body will not be able "to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world."[227]

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[223] Rowe, Katherine. " 'Remember me': technologies of memory in Michael Almereyda's Hamlet." *Shakespeare, the Movie, II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video.* Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 2003, 48.
[224] Abbate 2004, 82.
[225] Burnett 2003, 49.
[226] Burnett 2003, 49.
[227] Burnett 2003, 49; quoting Fredric Jameson.

5.5.3 *State of Love and Trust*

A tragic example of technology destroying a human relationship, or rather even a life, is the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. Abbate points out how Almereyda interprets their love story as something that would be capable of liberation and mutual understanding, especially against the background of a corrupt world defined by egoism and disconnection, but somehow the young lovers get lost in the mayhem of technology.[228] In fact, Abbate continues, their love first originated from the mutual fascination with reproduced images, Ophelia's through photography and Hamlet's through filmmaking.

Further, Richard Burt claims that Almereyda has a rather sentimental take on the play, as Hamlet's romantic love for Ophelia, along with Ophelia's love for him, as well as their "knowledge via art/media are opposed to parental and self-surveillance."[229] This, in short, means that the film opposes not only Hamlet's authenticity as a lover and a scholar, but also Ophelia's resistance to the overwhelming patriarchy, by linking the young lovers to print and visual media, with all kinds of technological gadgets. However, Burt claims that in some way it is the older generations that seem to be more "allhyper-mediatized," contrary to what Burnett argued earlier about Sam Shepard representing the older technology used in the theatre. Indeed, on occasion, Hamlet and Ophelia communicate also through actual notes on paper; similarly, Horatio's apartment is filled with real books. It is Claudius and Polonius who have surrounded themselves with, for instance, surveillance cameras. In fact, the only instance where Hamlet resorts to using a computer for writing is when he deletes and rewrites the message that will lead

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[228] Abbate 2004, 84.
[229] Burt, Richard. "Shakespeare and Asia in postdiasporic cinemas: spin-offs and citations of the plays from Bollywood to Hollywood." *Shakespeare, the Movie, II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 2003, 294.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths.[230]

Despite their seeming fascination with older ways to communicate, together Hamlet and Ophelia choose to reject words as a medium of communication and knowledge. Instead, at times they use photos and film footages to communicate even with each other – even when using actual notes on paper it is also pictures, not only words, that is drawn and written on them.[231] Somehow, then, they seem caught in between the lo- and hi-tech devices, as if they could not make up their minds on where they belong. They are caught in the middle of some kind of transition; again, to quote Shapiro from page 22, they are, indeed, straddling worlds and struggling to reconcile past and present.

Similarly, the two are not seen talking with each other much, and, ironically enough, the only intimate exchange of words they share is their breaking up, and even this is eavesdropped, as Polonius has wired Ophelia with a microphone. In fact, the break-up scene begins with affection; Hamlet has ceased to be cruel towards Ophelia, but as they are kissing, Hamlet finds the wire: "the irreparable has happened,"[232] and so a wire, a piece of technology, shatters the little trust left between Hamlet and Ophelia:

> What we see is a tragic transformation in the meaning of technology: the very thing they have in common – objects of mechanical reproduction – becomes the thing that tears them apart. Hamlet and Ophelia's private tragedy is that of technology taking over feelings, irrevocable separation, the pain of which no communication device, however sophisticated, can alleviate or reverse.[233]

So, even breaking up – "I say we will have no more marriage"[234] – can be neatly done through voicemail, as Hamlet yells the rest of his lines into an answering

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[230] Burt 2003, 294.
[231] Like, for instance, the note Ophelia gives to Hamlet; she suggests a meeting, but instead of words, she resorts to drawing a picture of the fountain by which they are to meet. Hamlet, on the other hand, writes – by hand – love letters to Ophelia.
[232] Abbate 2004, 84.
[233] Ibid.
[234] *Hamlet*, 3:1:149.

machine. Abbate strikes home when he says that in Almereyda's *Hamlet* – and, no doubt in the current world as well – "human relationships have become a disembodied dial-up network."[235] People have become so much estranged from each other that even feelings are dealt with through machines. Consequently, Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship undergoes what "Baudrillard calls a 'stereophonic effect:' the answering machine is a technological device that produces an 'effect of absolute proximity to the real.'" At the same time it "reduces any real sense of closeness by means of an 'effect of simulation;'"[236] the moment Hamlet's simulated voice reaches Ophelia, he disappears – "With a *beep*, the telephone decrees the end of their affair."[237]

Needless to say, then, that the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is, by definition, very clearly marked by the end-of-millennium, hi-tech urban environment, or as Celeste Olalquiaga calls it, by "vicarious sensibility," that is, the indirect impression of those personal events that are usually thought to be lived directly, such as physical sensation. Olalquiaga continues: "In contemporary urban experience, feeling emotions and sensations are more effectively called upon by media imagery or high-tech simulacra than through direct exposure."[238] Consequently, as already stated, Ophelia and Hamlet spend more time watching each other on film or in photos than they do in real life: "While the lover's bodies fail to meet, their cyber-selves get together in a virtual place, a place where the space-time coordinates people."[239] This, coincidently, bears much resemblance to the widely popular simulacra of the real world online, such as *Second Life*, where, in short, you can create a new, virtual self:

> Reality is catching up Second Life, the much hyped 3-D website that lets users create alter egos called avatars who can walk, chat, fly, have sex and buy and sell virtual stuff for real money. The ballyhoo surrounding this online

[235] Abbate 2004, 82.
[236] Abbate 2004, 84.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Olalquiaga 1992, quoted in Abbate 2004, 86.
[239] Abbate 2004, 86.

> community has led multinational brands from Reebok to Toyota to establish beachheads on Second Life to interact with consumers and be a part of the next wave in social networking… by the end of 2011, 80% of active Internet users will have some sort of presence in a virtual world…[240]

Here, again we are reminded of the second self Hamlet creates through his video diaries. The problem, it seems, is whether you can be sure you will be able to draw the line between a virtual world and the real one. Similar to living in *Second Life*, Hamlet, in his odd semi-virtual, semi-real world, shows "a striking capacity to glean real joy and comfort from merely imagined relations with merely imagined people."[241] He, for one, seems to have lost the sense of what is real and what is virtual. However, it is obvious that Hamlet's joy is imperfect, as his behavior is near self-destructive, affected by the failure of technology to fulfill his emotional needs.[242]

Consequently, Joana Owens, too, argues that Hamlet's fixation on the images on film only increases his isolation from the surrounding world, and that while he is trying to make sense of his situation by repeatedly watching these images, rewinding and forwarding the footage, their "sheer repetition only ends up further alienating him from the events and people they represent."[243] All this rewinding and forwarding is obviously linked with Hamlet's desire to in a way freeze time, or rather, to his desperate attempt to keep his father alive via the footages of happy family life. Or, as Abbate puts it, Hamlet is desperate to feel comfortable, and to pretend nothing has happened. In a way then the monitor functions as a device that "discloses psychic dimensions of estrangement, narcissism, and solipsism," and it also involves "the delusion of a comfortable authorial control over life."[244] Through the monitor Hamlet looks at his life, and gains some sort of control over the things that seems to be out of

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[240] Dell, Kristina. "Second Life's Real-World Problems." *Time*. Vol 170, Issue 7 (2007), 31.
[241] Abbate 2004, 86.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Owens 2003, 24.
[244] Abbate 2004, 84.

his reach. This way he can, as said, have his say in the order of things, but it also leaves him in a disillusioned state, thinking that he, in fact, is able to stop and organize life the way he wants. As Abbate points out, Hamlet is socially reduced to an amoeboid state, a "monocellular being, seemingly self-sufficient, but truly isolated."[245]

Again, a parallel between Almereyda's Hamlet and Salinger's Holden Caulfield is evident, as Holden, too, would like to freeze time and contain everything in a museum:

> The best thing, though, in that museum, was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move . . . Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be *you* . . . Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone.[246]

5.5.4 *Son, She Said, Have I Got A Little Story For You – The Mousetrap*

Lanier argues that Almereyda is after the idea of using film "to create an art of resistance,"[247] and describes Almereyda's Hamlet as a "gen-X amateur videographer," and, along with Ophelia, as an artist "immersed in visual-media culture yet struggling to find ways of resisting the corporate system the older generation exemplifies."[248] Attached to all this is Hamlet's – or perhaps more appropriately Almereyda's – critique of the mass media. As a counter reaction to them, like Almereyda himself, his Hamlet has become an independent filmmaker. However, we cannot say for sure if Almereyda's Hamlet actually manages to accomplish anything with his films – apart from the wished reaction to the film-with-a-film *The Mousetrap*, of course – that is, whether he can create an alternative to the corporate media run by Claudius and Polonius. So, the contemporary problem of living in a culture that is dominated by

[245] Abbate 2004, 84.
[246] Salinger 1974, 127-8.
[247] Lanier 2002, 172.
[248] Ibid.

"electronically (re)produced images" adds a distinctly postmodern element to the traditional interpretations of Shakespeare and his drama;[249] the problems are still the same, just the framework has changed.

> Almereyda's postmodern evocation of *noir* sets Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and his own film within a particular institutional history. No small part of the cachet of *film noir* is that it was a genre nominally situated within the Hollywood studio system but openly resistant to the dominant visual styles, genres, and ideologies of A-list fare . . . For many film critics and filmmakers, *noir* has come to epitomize mass-market film's capacity for social critique; it has, for example, become a powerful icon and model for the contemporary independent-film movement . . . *noir* becomes the means by which film Shakespeare can recover something of its traditional oppositional edge, while the confluence of the two provides a literary and cinematic genealogy for the kind of independent film that is Almereyda's forte.[250]

So, many of Hamlet's filmmaking efforts are connected with this desire to use his films to create a counterdiscourse, "to turn the technological apparatus of media culture back to itself in an effort to expose its complicity with corporate corruption."[251] However, it is interesting that though Hamlet has an air of independent, against-it-all rebel, there is not much innovation in his work. Paradoxically, copying and reproducing images is what Hamlet himself relies on when making his autobiographical *Mousetrap* video: he makes a collage of old cartoons, movies and porn to create his movie, so there is, in fact, very little originality in Hamlet's work. The fractured film-within-a-film work of Hamlet is, of course, typically postmodern, since postmodern pop culture seems to be, by definition, all about "ransacking and recycling of culture," and so, on the other hand "the direct invocation to other texts and other images" may in fact create a "vibrant critique rather than an inward-looking, second-hand aesthetic."[252] And again, we are back at the idea of copies of copies. Almereyda's pastiche-like version of the play-

[249] Owens 2003, 24.
[250] Lanier 2002, 169.
[251] Lanier 2002, 174.
[252] Burnett 2003, 58.

within-a-play is, after all, just reproducing images in a new context, and what is more, again, images replace words: with the old footages in the film and music in the background, there is no need for the players' words, all we need is an image of a drop of poison being poured into an ear.

However, even in the original play, *The Mousetrap* is an adaptation, or rather, a reproduction, as Hamlet inserts a speech that imitates the murder of his father to an older play, with the idea of catching Claudius's conscience; he wants to see his reaction to the play –" I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle . . . The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."[253] He wants the play to work like a mirror, "as 'twere the mirror up to nature"[254] that will make "the unskillful laugh" and "the judicious grieve."[255] What makes the scene somewhat tricky in the original play, however, is that Claudius fails to react to the dumb show preceding the actual play,[256] and when he finally does rush out, after the play, there is, perhaps, some uncertainty of why he does so: is it the guilt that bothers him or is it just a reaction to a shocking play. Much of this is lost in the film, but the wished effect is achieved: Claudius's conscience is, indeed, caught and Hamlet can be sure that the ghost was telling the truth.

Further, *The Mousetrap* takes us back to the difference between a theatre stage performance and directing a film. Like already stated (cf. chapter 3.1), on stage the performance is very much dependent on the actors' interpretation, and accordingly, in the original play, Hamlet was concerned of the players' abilities to act naturally, to interpret feelings as they are. In Almereyda's film, however, he rids himself of this problem: he is the one who picks the expressions that will be shown to the audience,

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[253] *Hamlet*, 2:2:590-592; 600-1.
[254] *Hamlet*, 3:2:22.
[255] *Hamlet*, 3:2:26.
[256] Jenkins, Harold. "Introduction." *Hamlet. The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*. London: Thomson Learning, 2003, 123.

cutting and pasting whichever images he likes. Here, then, we are show again that film, indeed, is somewhat more director-oriented. Also, for a moment, Hamlet is in control of one aspect in his otherwise out-of-control life. Further, with *The Mousetrap*, the omission of the original play's scene with Yorick's skull comes into picture: Hamlet's collage of clips of film includes a short extract of Sir John Gielgud addressing Yorick's skull, and so we are presented with the idea of how in postmodernity, cultural objects no longer stand on a pedestal, and once again, the boundary between "higher" and "lower" arts is blurred.[257] Further, the concept of making a collage out of genres completely different from one another, and also Hamlet's renting of a huge number of videos at the Blockbuster, again show that even here Hamlet is unable to make up his mind, that is, to which "genre" he should belong to:

> Hamlet is represented as vexed by the prospect of having to settle on a single definitive role model. In fact, what Almereyda engineers here is a subtle updating, a translation of Hamlet, the character, from the classical creature of indecision to a participant in postmodern schizophrenia.[258]

In a word, Almereyda's Hamlet is just as indecisive as all the other, traditional Hamlets, but the irresoluteness of this modern Hamlet can now be labeled as schizophrenia attached to postmodernism. So, does that mean that the modern individual who cannot make up his mind in the excess of possibilities suffers from postmodern schizophrenia? Given the theoretical discussion on schizophrenia as "a breakdown in the syntagmatic chain . . . in which all that remains is a mass of seemingly disassociated ideolects and symbols,"[259] the description does seem to fit the Western way of living, where everything is tinted with an air of "too much too fast." Or, at least the description fits Hamlet, who is trying to find "a common denominator

[257] Burnett 2003, 58.
[258] Burnett 2003, 59.
[259] Ibid.

that will transmute his pixel-visioned restlessness into an organic narrative."[260] In a word, Hamlet is trying to make sense of the world he lives in, and, again, trying to find his own place in it. His schizophrenia, or ours, for that matter, is nothing that should be seen as something pejorative, Burnett continues; it is just a way to survive.[261]

Yu Jin Ko, too, questions, in commenting on the pastiche-like *Mousetrap*, Hamlet's rebelliousness: "Why should this grungy rebel with a camera then resort to the very clichés he seems so intent on rebelling against?"[262] If Hamlet is in fact searching for an alternative reality though his private films, it is never clear that this reality "ever acquires the substance of reality" and that Hamlet seems to have "replaced real family with reel ones."[263] Yu Jin Ko goes on to show that while it may be irrelevant whether Hamlet does reach something with his films or not, it is clear that with *The Mousetrap* he takes an important step towards adulthood, or at least he seems to grab a hold of the world. After the public display of his film, his video diaries are not seen any more; the presentation of *The Mousetrap* somehow empowers Hamlet, as soon after it he is found with blood on his hands after killing Polonius.[264]

5.6 *…It's Just Inadvertent Simulation, a Pattern in All Mankind* – Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra*

So, given the fact that Hamlet is completely surrounded by technological reproductive devices and reproduced images, far from anything authentic, the question of finding the truth becomes somewhat tricky. And here, again, we come across Baudrillard's ideas of "real" and "original." Baudrillard discusses the concept of "a copy of a

[260] Burnett 2003, 59.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Yu Jin Ko 2005, 19.
[263] Yu Jin Ko 2005, 23.
[264] Yu Jin Ko 2005, 26-7.

copy," and how old images and signs relate to the present day, and argues that our society has in fact replaced all reality and meaning with different symbols and signs, and that consequently all that we know as real is actually a simulation of reality. Byron Hawk discusses Baudrillard's ideas of the simulacra in the sphere of contemporary culture:

> The culture industry blurs the lines between facts and information, between information and entertainment, between entertainment and politics. The masses get bombarded by these images (simulations) and signs (simulacra) which encourage them to buy, vote, work, play, . . . but eventually they become apathetic (i.e. cynical). Because simulations and simulacra ultimately have no referents, the social begins to implode. This process of social entropy leads to the collapse of all boundaries between meaning, the media, and the social – no distinction between classes, political parties, cultural forms, the media, and the real. Simulation and simulacra become the real so there are no stable structures on which to ground theory or politics. Culture and society become a flux of undifferentiated images and signs.[265]

Hawk talks about the way the simulacra work in popular culture, and gives an example of the MTV generation. He claims that putting gangsta-rap, for instance, on display on MTV takes the music completely out of its historical and social context. Since the music was created as an expression of resistance to the feeling of domination in urban life, "the white suburban kids" cannot relate to the music the way they should, as they have no understanding of the actual situational context. "The videos are just images on the screen like all the other images on the screen that they see everyday."[266] As a consequence, all this "takes away the 'reality' of the historical context, and replaces it with hyperreality. By removing the context, MTV removes all resistant meaning." [267]

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[265] Hawk, Byron. *Simulation*. http://www.uta.edu/english/hawk/semiotics/baud.htm.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.

5.6.1 *The Real Thing* – Almereyda Meets Baudrillard

Whether Almereyda was directly influenced by Baudrillard is anyone's guess, but there is, indeed, many things in the film that echo the Baudrillardian ideas of the simulacra. However, even the original play is playing with these issues: nothing is as it seems, and originality and authenticity are what Hamlet is after all along. And, of course, the play itself is a copy of earlier texts.

However, if the simulacra that Baudrillard refers to are the signs of culture and media that create the reality we perceive, linking Almereyda's *Hamlet* with, for instance, Hawk's gangsta-rappers is a little complicated. Even if the rap videos do become hyperreality, as Hawk suggests, they are still reality, in a way. They have just become something not necessarily connected to their origins, but rather copies that stand on their own without a model – copies of copies that are so degenerated in their relation to the original that they can no longer be said to be copies per se. Similarly then, Almereyda's work is a copy of Shakespeare's play, but also a copy of previous copies of the plays of Shakespeare. Though it does rely heavily on the "original text," it is an independent entity. Or, as Stam points out, the film as a "copy" can be the "original" for later "copies," and so a film adaptation as "copy" is not necessarily inferior to the novel as "original."[268] After all, the supposed "original" almost always turns out to be a copy of something older. Similar to the example of the gangsta rap, Almereyda's *Hamlet* receives a new meaning, and it is a meaning that changes according to its audience, and so, one could argue, it does not matter if much of the original is gone.

What is more, it is not only Almereyda's work per se that is some kind of a copy, but also the contents of it, that is, Hamlet's *Mousetrap* and the numerous

[268] Stam 2005, 8.

reproductions of images, for instance, in the film. Or, as Abbate puts it; "What Almereyda's film, then, deals with is something of an ontological shift from reality to simulacrum, as though the reproduction enclosed the essence of an individual, and the reproduction was more real than reality."[269] Abbate gives an example of this through the break up scene where Ophelia is burning pictures of Hamlet; Ophelia, the photographer, has been in love with not only the flesh-and-blood Hamlet, but also with his celluloid reproduction, and so, Hamlet will disappear only if and when the pictures of him are destroyed.[270] Again, the concept of *Second Life* is present, as the idea of a parallel virtual world is rather Baudrillardian. People imitate and simulate real life, mold it into another reality that exists only in bites and pixels, and yet, in the sphere of the virtual world they spend real life money, make actual business and fall in love with real people and/or their virtual alter egos. The simulacrum of real life is given a new context and so it becomes reality of its own, hyperreality even.

The new technologies consequently contribute to the massive copy making. Stam argues that they in fact undermine ideas of purity and essence, and so digital imaging "de-ontologizes" the image, since images themselves are no longer faithful to any pro-filmic model. So, with the infinite possibilities of reproduction, there is no loss of quality, as the images are stored in pixels, and so there really is no "original" to begin with.[271] Everything is copyable. A good example of this is, again, the fact that Hamlet prefers to watch Ophelia on film, rather than having her physically there. In fact, Abbate argues that Hamlet sees Ophelia as "a thing, a shot, and a frame – something he can cut and paste with his editing gadgets."[272] This is, of course, what he does with the materials he uses for *The Mousetrap*. Similarly, when Ophelia goes

[269] Abbate 2004, 85.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Stam 2005, 12.
[272] Abbate 2004, 85.

mad, she scatters around snap shots instead of real flowers, and the empty cases in the video store underline the fact that whatever will fill the cases, they will be *copies* in masses. Further, the clip of the film showing in the background in the Blockbuster scene is the final scene of *Crow II – The City of Angels*, which is, ironically enough, an action revenge story: we get a clip of a rather poor sequel, not of the original one. Even Fortinbras, as already stated, is seen as copies only, and not in flesh and blood; for instance, Almereyda has Fortinbras appear on the cover of the magazine *Wired* that Rosencrantz reads on the plane to England, as well as on the TV screen there.

5.6.2 *Nothing As It Seems* – In Search of Something Real

Consequently, Abbate questions how can Hamlet, under such circumstances, possibly know where the truth is hid: how can he even begin to determine the meaning of life in such a situation, where life has become just a matter of "negotiating between the essence and simulation" and where "reality and façade, being and performing, have blurred into one."[273] So, is Hamlet even really after truth and reality? With all the reproductions around, it seems rather self-inflected that he is unable to find anything real.

However, already the original play is filled with performing and upholding façades. Claudius, for instance, is nothing he pretends to be. The first scene where he appears giving the speech to his court gives the impression of an untrustworthy man trying to convince others and even himself that there is nothing out of the ordinary. He pretends to be a loving husband to Gertrud, "our sometime sister, now our queen,"[274] while in reality he is probably the most cunning and cruel character of the play. Accordingly, Knights points out how even before we know Claudius is a

[273] Abbate 2004, 82.
[274] *Hamlet*, 1:2:8.

murderer, it is clear "that on his first appearance we are intended to register something repulsive."[275] Similarly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, pretending to be Hamlet's friends, are now spies working for the King,[276] and even Hamlet resorts to feigning to be mad. In fact, pretending to be mad is about using yet another alter ego, a second self. Similarly the Queen is forced to build up a façade at the end, and not let on that she knows the truth about the old Hamlet's death. In fact, Horatio and Marcella/Marcellus appear to be the few people who do not need any second selves, but are able to remain true to themselves and the people around. Consequently they are, as said, essentially the only people Hamlet sees worth trusting: their friendship seems to be among the few authentic and true things in Hamlet's life. In fact, Abbate argues that here we have an interesting difference between the play itself and Almereyda's adaptation: he claims that the original text suggests that the few people Hamlet trusts and sees worthy of respect are the players of his play-within-a-play. This, supposedly, is completely lost in the film, as *The Mousetrap* is nothing but a pastiche of earlier films.[277] However, Abbate does fail to recognize the fact that already in the original play Horatio is, indeed, by Hamlet's side whenever needed; he is, for example, around during *The Mousetrap* scene, when Hamlet is challenged to the dual, and most importantly, he is there when Hamlet dies.

Also, Abbate underlines the paradox in the fact that when Hamlet gives his soliloquy about the quintessence of things, we can only see a virtual man, that is, a man in pixels on a screen uttering his doubts about the human condition, "a monitor man lecturing us on matters of conscience and spirit."[278]

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[275] Knights 1966, 183.
[276] During the course of the play, Hamlet, too, becomes certain of their treachery: he calls Rosencrantz a sponge, "that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities." (*Hamlet*, 4:3:14-15)
[277] Abbate 2004, 86.
[278] Abbate 2004, 82.

> What piece of work is a man,
> how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form
> and moving how express and admirable, in action
> how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god:
> the beauty of the word, the paragon of animals –
> and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?[279]

Again, we are served a dosage of postmodern irony as a copy of a man is pouring his heart out on the problems of humanity. Here, perhaps, we are on track to finding out why Almereyda would have chosen *Hamlet* as his vehicle to discuss the problems of the contemporary world. At the end of the day, the problems Hamlet encounters are universal: despite the change in the settings, we are still searching for the quintessence of things, quite like all the Hamlets back in Shakespeare's time. Choosing who and what to be and deciding what is worth considering real is perhaps complicated by the simulacra in which we live, but not too drastically, as we just do our contemplation on the issue also through technology. For Almereyda, locating such a familiar story in New York, or more generally to the immediate present, was all about balancing "respect for the play with respect for contemporary reality – to see how thoroughly Shakespeare can speak to the present moment, how they can speak to each other."[280]

On the other hand, however, all the technological development is just on the surface; during the last ten thousand years the world has changed to something completely different, but the human mind has remained more or less the same. So, again, we come to the same conclusion: universality is what determines it all. No matter how much the world around us changes, we still have the same basic needs and questions that boggle our minds. The seemingly contemporary problems that Almereyda discusses are not so contemporary after all, they just represent themselves in a contemporary light; the characters of his film are still defined by the collapse of

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[279] *Hamlet*, 2:2:303-5.
[280] Almereyda 2000, viii.

human relationships and growth of personal alienation.

5.6.3 *Into Your Garden of Stone* – The Natural Unnatural

So, the problem of authenticity, as well as the search for the truth, the real and natural are essential to the play. Everyone is suspected and suspicious, spying and spied on, and all that is seemingly real, turns out to be only representation of the real. This is echoed even in the grim *mise-en-scène* that is New York. The characters' alienation from the natural world is further emphasized with small and sometimes easily dismissable details, and it is these "unnaturalizable" objects that contribute to the "maximum entropy"[281] of the film. For instance, Ophelia's rubber duck,[282] as well as the diorama box of a forest she receives from Hamlet work as reminders of Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum, where the "'lost object' is fetishized and in which 'hyperreality' . . . is permitted to dominate."[283]

In fact, throughout the film, images of the natural world are given center stage. However, what is striking about these moments is the artificiality of the elements involved, that is, how even the "natural" images are somehow unnatural, such as the rubber duck and the diorama box. Essentially the only scene that steps out of the urban environment, and where some natural world and outside life are included is Ophelia's funeral, as it is set outside the city center, in a cemetery filled with natural daylight, trees and surfaces not made of glass or concrete. There are even children running around. It is, as Burnett argues, the only landscape in the film that is not affected by consumerism.[284] This, then, brings into question once more one of the central issues of the play, that is, what is real and reality? Hamlet seeks for the truth

[281] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 159.
[282] An allusion to Aki Kaurismäki's *Hamlet Goes Business*, where Hamlet tries to prevent his uncle from turning the family business from timber and oil to Swedish rubber ducks. Burnett 2003, 65.
[283] Burnett 2003, 55.
[284] Ibid.

and authenticity, but still chooses to surround himself with objects that are not the real thing, but mere artificial Baudrillardian reproductions. Again, then, Almereyda's Hamlet almost seems to be something of a dilettante, not really focusing of the task of finding authenticity. Certainly he cannot expect to find authenticity and naturalness in copies of old films, in skyscrapers of New York.

Reading still further into the scene at the cemetery, Ophelia's death on the whole is an interesting comment on the natural reality; even the waterfall in which she drowns is not a real one, but an urban, indoor representation of a waterfall.

> Ophelia is buried in the world toward which her substitutions and representational devices have been striving: her death becomes an attempt to return both to a location (a landscape unaffected by consumerism) and to a mode of being (an integrated sense of self) that postmodernity has tragically eclipsed. Nature is represented . . . as a territory in which there is a "regular interplay of signs and things" that gives order to "time and space . . . information and knowledge."[285]

Burnett points out how, despite the natural reality of the graveyard, it is, in fact, "a repository for imitations:"[286] Almereyda deletes the scene with Yorick's skull, but the gravedigger's song stands "as a musical substitute for the material embodiment of Yorick's skull."[287] So, instead of "Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow / of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy,"[288] a mourning for a once dear court jester, we receive the song about a jester complaining to the thief about there being no way out and getting no relief. Similarly, "Ophelia's simulacra of growth are arguably overshadowed by the physical praxis of decay and her own mortality:" in postmodernity, nature can only be commodified.[289] Everything can be imitated, reproduced and reduplicated, and there is essentially no need to have the "real thing" around.

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[285] Burnett 2003, 55.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.
[288] *Hamlet*, 5:1:178-9.
[289] Burnett 2003, 55.

5.7 *I Don't Question Our Existence, I Just Question Our Modern Needs* – Corporate Capitalism, Consumerism and Coke

The fact that Almereyda's film is filled with reflecting, but also see-through materials is, according to Burnett, the most potent visualization of late capitalism; Almereyda's *Hamlet* is a "glasshouse of tinted windows, mirrors, lenses and screens."[290] The New York in Almereyda's film is also marked by economic determinants, and they are ruthlessly underlined throughout the film. Particularly obvious are the big signs of market places: Hamlet is seen in front of supermarket discount posters, while Claudius, to emphasize the two men's distance from each other, is pictured with images of neon share indexes. Burnett argues that this imagery pictures not only the physical distance between Hamlet and Claudius, but also the prevalence of a monetary imperative.[291] There is some irony, particularly when we keep Almereyda's themes in mind, in the fact that Shakespeare in general was linked in the corporate world of business in the wake of the Shakespeare film boom of the 1990s. Lanier points out how the emergence of business publishing used Shakespeare lavishly, and so manuals for corporate management appeared with titles such as *Shakespeare in Charge*, *Power Plays* and *Shakespeare on Management*, among others.[292] Evidently business, too, is universal, or at least Shakespeare's take on the human kind:

> . . . these volumes take as their premise the notion that Shakespeare portrays the intricacies of a universally shared human nature and direct that notion toward providing lessons in corporate motivation, leadership, personnel management, and decision-making: "Business involves people," we are told, "and people – fundamentally – don't change. The essence of business is thus remarkably constant." And so, for example . . . *Hamlet's* Claudius becomes a case study in flawed crisis management . . .[293]

It is tempting to think that Almereyda, too, has got his hand on these books and is now, in his own film filled with corporatism, having a laugh at them.

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[290] Burnett 2003, 51.
[291] Burnett 2003, 50.
[292] Lanier 2002, 157.
[293] Lanier 2002, 157-8.

There is also a parallel between Claudius's guilt and the critique of corporatism. In Almereyda's film, it seems, the guilt bothers Claudius even more than in the original play. Or rather, in the film Claudius fails to keep his cool as things are slipping out of his hands: in the laundromat, after Hamlet refuses to tell where Polonius's body is hid, and suggesting that Claudius should seek it "i'th'other place,"[294] that is, in hell, if he cannot be found in heaven, Claudius suddenly punches him hard in the stomach. Claudius is, evidently, irritated not only by Hamlet's arrogant answers, but also by the fact that he seems to be suggesting that Claudius will end up in hell for all his bad deeds; Hamlet is, Claudius seems to think, onto him, and the murder he has committed. The sudden burst of violence is Almereyda's own interpretation of the situation, as it is not present in the original play. Consequently, the violence Almereyda uses is there to emphasize the difference between the façade Claudius has and his real methods. So there is, indeed "violence behind the façade of benign normalcy," as Lanier pointed out on page 56. Accordingly, then, if we see Claudius as a representative of corporate capitalism and Hamlet as an insurgent individual who opposes all this, Almereyda's message is clear: corporate capitalism is the big evil in the film, as well as in the current world. Claudius, representing "flawed crisis management," is suddenly scared when he realizes that this individual opposing him might actually destroy his empire. Perhaps, then, the violence is also a comment on the way large corporate powers tend to crush anything that stands on their way – all, it seems, is fair in love, war and corporatism. Further, Almereyda himself can surely relate to this, since struggling as an independent filmmaker among big corporate film powers must, at times, feel like getting punched in the stomach.

[294] *Hamlet*, 4:4:34.

What makes the scene even more puzzling is Claudius's sudden return to his normal, corrupt and seemingly pleasant self when Hamlet does finally answer. He strokes Hamlet's hair, and tells him about the trip to England. Again, we are shown how Claudius's ostensible amiability is just an act, and for a second or two, Hamlet actually does manage to find something real, as Claudius reveals his true nature. Hamlet reacts by saying "Farewell, dear mother," and as Claudius corrects him with "Thy loving father,"[295] Hamlet explains the expression with father and mother being one flesh, and then, suddenly kisses Claudius' on the mouth. This, then, could be seen as an allusion to the oedipal reading of Hamlet's relationship to Gertrude, Almereyda has only twisted the situation on its head by having Hamlet mock Claudius with the kiss.

5.7.1 *Never Thought You'd Habit* – Product Placement

A phenomenon that can be seen as a comment on the corporate world and the strains it imposes on us is the frequency with which product placement – a rather hostile product placement, one might add – takes place in Almereyda's film. Big brands such as Panasonic, Boss and Marlboro are scattered around the film, as well as Carlsberg (appropriately a Danish beer brand). There is also, of course, the Pepsi One Calorie machine into which the Ghost disappears.

If we consider Almereyda's film as a critique of the mass production and mass media – "as an indictment of corporate capitalism and globalization"[296]– one could then argue that instead of the traditional product placement, Almereyda uses the brands to criticize, as well as to satirize the very phenomenon of product placement. While most "translated" details in the film, such as the ski cap, the films-within-the-

[295] *Hamlet*, 4:4:53.
[296] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 160.

film or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lap top have recognizable equivalents within the playtext itself, the Pepsi machine, as well as the other trade marks are there just for satire, it seems. The brands can be seen as "crass product placement within a commercial film that paradoxically assails its own commerciality."[297] Consequently, Almereyda reports having been quite stunned about the harsh criticism the product placement in his film received.

> The undignified, all but unbelievable truth is that we paid for the privilege of parading certain logos and insignias across the screen. There was, after all, an intended point. "Denmark is a prison," Hamlet declares early on, and if you consider this in terms of contemporary consumer culture, the bars of the cage are defined by advertising, by all the hectic distractions, brand names, announcements and ads that crowd our waking hours . . . It's another way to touch the core of Hamlet's anguish, to recognize the frailty of spiritual values in a material world, and to get a whiff of something rotten in Denmark on the threshold of our self-congratulatory new century.[298]

As clever as ironizing commercialism through hostile product placement is, there is also a risk of "masking the contradictory position that Almereyda's own film seeks to occupy."[299] That is, a position that is particularly obvious given the long list of corporate acknowledgements at the end of the credits. Ironically, "the problematic nature of postmodern irony,"[300] as Lanier calls it, became evident when Almereyda's film was all set to be released as a video: several independent video-store owners did not feel comfortable in distributing a film that so abundantly gave visibility for Blockbuster, their main corporate competitor, and so the release of the video was, in fact, delayed.[301] So here, the clever ironizing of corporate powers backfired. The reaction of the video-store owners was, after all, justifiable, as the appearance of Blockbuster, particularly an appearance that obvious, does end up strengthening the competitor's corporate power.

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[297] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 160.
[298] Almereyda 2000, xi.
[299] Lanier 2002, 177.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid.

5.7.2 *Thought Becomes Numb and Naïve* – Mass Production

Along with corporatism comes, of course, mass production. Again, Baudrillard's ideas are quite fitting, as he argues that in postmodernism, culture, knowledge and all particularly human capacities are in fact integrated in the order of production as commodities, and further materialized as productive forces:

> Consumption is a collective and active behavior, a constraint, amorality, and an institution. It is a complete system of values, with all that the term implies concerning group integration and social control. Consumer society is also the society for the apprenticeship of consumption, for the social indoctrination of consumption. In other words, this is a new and specific mode of *socialization* related to the rise of new productive forces and the monopolistic restructuration of a high output economic system.[302]

Consequently, Almereyda's *Hamlet* echoes thoughts presented in Baudrillard's ideas on consumerism. Baudrillard argues that we are today – or, already were towards the late 1980s when his ideas were first published – completely surrounded by the incredible conspicuousness of consumption and prosperity, which is established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods. This, then, leads into an elemental change in the ecology of the human species, which essentially means that men of wealth are no longer surrounded by other human beings like before, but instead find themselves among objects.[303] Baudrillard continues on the state of contemporary human beings:

> Their daily exchange is no longer with their fellows, but rather, statistically as a function of some ascending curve, with the acquisition and manipulation of goods and messages: from the rather complex domestic organization with its dozens of technical slaves to the "urban estate" with all the material machinery of communication and professional activity, and the permanent festive celebration of objects in advertising with the hundreds of daily mass media messages; from the proliferation of somewhat obsessional objects to the symbolic psychodrama which fuels the nocturnal objects that come to haunt us even in our dreams.[304]

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[302] Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, 49.
[303] Baudrillard 1990, 29.
[304] Ibid.

All this alienates us from the natural world, just as it alienates Hamlet or Claudius from the world surrounding them. Like Baudrillard suggests on a general level, Hamlet is accordingly constantly haunted by everything that the world produces, and he is unable to communicate or reach any level of connection with people around him. So, as a result, he retreats to his objects, behind his video camera and footages he has shot.

5.7.3 *What's Got the Whole World Faking?* – The Ghost in the Machine

However, one could also argue that since actual commodities are rarely seen in Almereyda's work – for example, it is not quite clear what it is Claudius's corporation trades in, but apparently it has something to do with film production – there seems to be also a dominance of *signs* of the corporate world. Burnett goes on to quote Guy Debord's idea that "the image has become the final form of commodity reification;"[305] this could then mean that the visual bits and pieces have in fact a more important role than the materials they are supposed to represent. Consequently, the Ghost disappearing into the Pepsi machine is used not only for the sake of using a well-known brand-name: "the implication is that his dissolution is also a consumption: Hamlet's father is engulfed by the very energies that, as president of the Denmark Corporation, he had earlier commanded."[306] Perhaps here, then, we are reminded of the consequences of extreme consumerism, since even the old Hamlet is swallowed up by something he himself helped to build. The Western world notoriously consumes much more than it and nature could afford, and so perhaps one day we, too, will be engulfed by the very energies we now think we command.

Fedderson and Richardson read even further into the appearance of the Pepsi

[305] Burnett 2003, 50.
[306] Ibid.

machine: they point out that it suggests Pepsi's well known slogan of the time, i.e. "The Next Generation," which can be read as an allusion to the theme of the generational gap. Further, they argue that the fact it is not a Coke machine, i.e. not "The Real Thing," brings forth, again, the question of authenticity, and this time the authenticity and status of the Ghost. This is, of course, one of Hamlet's major concerns in the play, whether to believe the Ghost or not.[307] However, as clever as this theory sounds, Almereyda himself claims that the only reason it is not a Coke machine is because "Coke said no."[308]

Moreover, the idea of the ghost in the machine could be taken back to Arthur Koestler's book *The Ghost in the Machine*.[309] While reading this much into the Pepsi machine may be irrelevant, the idea is interesting: the book's title hails from a term developed by philosopher Gilbert Ryle to describe Descartes' mind-body dualism, that is, the humankind's tendency to self-destruction. Supposedly then, our brains have grown over time and consequently build up on earlier primitive brain structures, leaving "ghosts in the machine" under the new structures. It is these ghosts, Koestler argues, that cause sporadic fits of hate and anger when they overpower the higher logical functions.[310] So, perhaps it is these ghosts in the machine that make the characters of the film, particularly Claudius, harm others, and maybe it is the same ghosts that enable corporatism and consumerism to thrive the way they do in the Western society.

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[307] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 160.
[308] Almereyda in an interview, May 2, 2000. (www.combustiblecelluloid.com/inthawke.shtml).
[309] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 160.
[310] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_in_the_machine.

5.8 *A Dissident is Here* – To Inter-be, to Take Action or Just to Linger on?

As we have seen, Almereyda uses films-within-the-film, along with music, to bring curious intertextualities to the film; with the numerous random clips from here and there, the artsy Hamlet watches a James Dean movie in one of the many moments he spends alone with his audiovisual devices. Even though the clip is not from *Rebel Without a Cause* (but from a little known TV appearance titled *The Unlighted Road* from 1955[311]), the message is clear enough: James Dean *is* the all-time rebel, representing the universal angst of young men, and for Hamlet, he is someone to relate to.

5.8.1 *Up Here in My Tree* – The Buddhist Approach to Being

However, perhaps the most curious case of a film-within-a-film is a clip of *Peace is Every Step*. In the clip the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat-Hanh talks about how it is, in fact, impossible *to be* without other people, that is, how we need other people to be able *to be*, and that is why we should talk about *inter-being*, not mere *being*.

> We have the "to be", but what I propose is the word "to inter-be." Because it is not possible to be alone, to be by yourself. You need other people in order to be . . . Not only do you need mother, father, but also uncle, brother, sister, society. But you also need sunshine, river, air, trees, birds, elephants and so on. So it is impossible to be alone. You have to inter-be with everyone and everything else. And therefore "to be" means to "inter-be."[312]

The Buddhist monk's speech is, of course, an obvious reference to Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, but it also works as yet another example of "linguistic dispossession;"[313] here, however, it is not images that replace words entirely, but the words have been translated into something new, aside with the original ones. The fact

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[311] Austin Film Society, http://www.austinfilm.org/screenings/jamesdean.php.
[312] Almereyda 2000, 37.
[313] Burnett 2003, 55.

that the monk mentions how we need a mother, father and an uncle in order to inter-be is, of course, as Abbate points out, a bitterly ironic comment on Hamlet's situation.[314] What is more, there is further irony in the fact that, according to the monk, we need all these aspects of nature, such as sunshine, rivers and trees to inter-be, as these are all, obviously, not present in Hamlet's life. However, what is interesting about featuring the monk's wisdoms in the film is the fact that while he is uttering his concerns on inter-being, Hamlet is hardly, if at all, listening. The TV screen on which we see the monk speak seems to be there only for background noise, as Hamlet keeps himself occupied with something else. On the other hand, though, Hamlet's following actions do suggest that he has, indeed, been somehow affected by what the monk has said, since he is next seen writing a letter to Ophelia.

Moreover, as Hamlet's isolation and murkiness in Almereyda's film is underlined by his incapability to interact directly with people, the Buddhist monk's words seem even more appropriate to Hamlet's situation. Since his infamous problem is whether to be or not, and if *to be* really is *to inter-be*, he tries to solve the situation by *not inter-being* with the people around, pushing them away. At the end of the day, Horatio, again, appears to be essentially the only person whose authenticity Hamlet does not doubt and whose company he seeks.

The whole *To be or not to be* –soliloquy is scattered into three segments in the film, and this is, perhaps, one of the most radical acts of translations Almereyda chooses to make in his adaptation. The first of the three segments is the discussion about inter-being, and which does not really contain any references to suicide. However, later in the film we see Hamlet on a TV screen, uttering only the first words

[314] Abbate 2004, 85.

of the soliloquy – "To be, or not to be."[315] Now there is a clear allusion to suicide, as we see Hamlet taking a gun from his temple to his jaw and back – perhaps yet another indication of his irresoluteness: he does not even know where he would shoot himself if it came to that. Abbate makes an interesting point on Hamlet watching himself on video simulating suicide: here Hamlet in fact deludes himself into believing that he can actually escape from the cause/effect relationship of reality, since within the false ontology of a video substitute, the existential "question" loses its original meaning:

> Here nothing can be definite: death is no longer an "undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns" . . . : at the mere stroke of a key every single process can be instantly reversed. It could be said that rather than to the questions "to be or not to be," Hamlet's meta-filmic discourse relates to his doubt about whether *to include or not to include* this suicide sequence in the autobiographical film he is making. His self-editing attitude shows how he fails to experience the flux of existence.[316]

Moreover, apparently Almereyda's Hamlet has been able to *inter-be* earlier with other people, since he has been able to form a seemingly close relationship with Ophelia. Similarly, the relationship he has had with his parents was evidently a close one. So, perhaps technology did not control Hamlet's life earlier, and he was consequently able to concentrate in other things – see and feel things himself, without any technological devices. So, maybe Hamlet did, after all, have some mirth to lose at one point in his life, but there is nothing left of it now.

So, while for example Polonius's fatherly advices to Laertes – a scene which is realized in a rather traditional way in Almereyda's film – offer us maximal iteration, the way Almereyda reorganizes the "to be or not to be" soliloquy gives us maximal translation.[317] At an intertextual level, Burnett argues,

> the protagonist is robbed of Shakespeare's most celebrated intellectual deliberation: the famous speech, in this multinational universe, has been

[315] *Hamlet* 3:1:56.
[316] Abbate 2004, 87.
[317] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 156.

> ethnically pluralized and philosophically transformed by the technological sphere of the new media establishment.[318]

This postmodern Hamlet, then, is so alienated and decentered that he cannot even utter his soliloquy in peace.

5.8.2 *Walking Tightrope High, On Moral Ground* – Hamlet's Delay

The final and the major part of the soliloquy is situated in a Blockbuster video store where Hamlet roams around the aisles, spitting out the words – "To die, to sleep, / No more; and by sleep to say we end / The heart ache . . ."[319] Paradoxically, as Hamlet ponders over the problem of being in the world, he walks along an aisle lined with "Action" signs; it seems that everything around him screams for action, or, as Fedderson and Richardson put it, the action aisle is "an ironic commentary on Hamlet's inability to be an action hero."[320] Along with the action genre, the store is filled with various other genres, and Hamlet feels "trapped within a genre in which he feels uncomfortable and inadequate."[321] It is the genre that scripts the fate of a character, and Hamlet would like to escape – again, to find a way out of – the genre he is stuck in, not to be a part of a revenge story filled with action.

Juxtaposing Laertes with Hamlet is also a giveaway innuendo of Hamlet's irresoluteness; after all, Laertes is the go-getter in the play, ready to revenge the murder of his father, and though he proves to be no man of honor, he does represent some qualities that Hamlet appears to lack. In fact, there is a curious difference between the two men: though already sure of Claudius's guilt, Hamlet still hesitates with the revenge, while Laertes is about to avenge Polonius's murder without bothering to find out whether it was Claudius who killed him. What is more, Jenkins

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[318] Burnett 2003, 55.
[319] *Hamlet* 3:1:60-3.
[320] Fedderson & Richardson 2004, 155.
[321] Ibid.

argues, also the character of Fortinbras, though almost erased from the film, is a good example of a man taking action over the smallest cause;[322] every now and then, Hamlet is reminded of Fortinbras's actions, as they are reported in the media.

Similarly Lanier points out that as Hamlet walks down the aisles of the video store under the "action" placards, he in fact faces the futility of even "seeking a revenge not always already scripted by the very corporate media forces he opposes."[323] Correspondingly the name of action has in fact been lost, "reduced to a marketing niche, the potential for meaningful resistance against co-opted, repackaged as mass-market spectacle, and mass-produced."[324] There is no escaping the mass-produced corporatism either, it seems. By the end of the Blockbuster scene, Almereyda does not seem to have come to any definite conclusion about the meaning of Hamlet's irresoluteness. Lanier suggests that there are two possible readings to the situation:

> If we are to judge by Hamlet's anguished glances around the store at speech's end, it is an omnipresent media system he here recognizes and wants desperately to resist. Yet if we judge by the stack of videos he brings to the counter after his breakup with Ophelia, videos that provide solace and models for identity (such as James Dean) and that will eventually become the material for his *Mousetrap*, it is a system he finds difficult to escape.[325]

Again we are reminded of Hamlet desire and inability to find a way out and to escape his prison. When Hamlet utters the lines about the unknown dreams that come in death – "To die, to sleep; / To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub: / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come . . ."[326] – he walks by a self full of empty video cases, i.e. cases that do not even have the titles on them yet, nor the genre defined. This could be seen as an allusion to "the undiscover'd country, from whose

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[322] Jenkins 2003, 136.
[323] Lanier 2002, 175.
[324] Lanier 2002, 176.
[325] Ibid.
[326] *Hamlet*, 3:1:64-6.

bourn / No traveler returns,"[327] that is, to death and what will happen after it, as this is something that puzzles Hamlet. To emphasize the irony of it all, there is a large "Go home happy" sign at the exit of the video store.

A further allusion to Hamlet's inability to take action can be found at his apartment. Hamlet has pictures of two great men of history, Che Guevara and Malcolm X, stuck on the wall by his desk. While Guevara dedicated his life to fighting against U.S. based economy, Malcolm X was the advocate for black pride and power, as well as economic self-reliance, and so they both represent people not afraid to take action and defend their cause. These figures seem appropriate for Hamlet's idols, particularly if we see Hamlet through the common reading of him being a Christ-like figure who sacrifices himself to save Denmark from its rottenness. Burnett points out that this is, in fact, also linked with Hamlet's repulsion of capitalism. The pictures, Burnett continues, "work to implicate the protagonist in revolutionary discourses and to liken him to a liberating yet doom-laden savior,"[328] since both Guevara and Malcolm X were, quite like Laertes, men who have qualities Hamlet only imperfectly possesses.

However, we cannot really determine whether Hamlet would even want to have these qualities in the first place; he is bound by the task given to him, by the promise made to the Ghost, but apparently would be more than delighted to be rid of the task: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right. . . ."[329] Now, one can, of course, argue that the task Almereyda's Hamlet is born to set right is not only avenging his father's death, but also setting things right on a wider scale, the corrupt corporation world around him, or if we think of the original play only, the moral anguish of the society. Cantor makes a relevant point of how

[327] *Hamlet*, 3:1:70-80.
[328] Burnett 2003, 60.
[329] *Hamlet*, 1:5:196-7.

traditionally Hamlet has been seen as self-divided, as if the self-division was some kind of a pathological state, and that it was only him that was fragmented, and the community around him whole. This self-division, however, hails from a more fundamental division of his age, Cantor continues. "Indeed Hamlet is distinguished in the play precisely by the fact that only he is truly aware of the contradictions in his era."[330] Jenkins, too, argues that Shakespeare in fact takes only limited interest in Hamlet as an avenger, and that the deeper interest is in "Hamlet the tragic-hero, required to take upon himself the moral distress of the whole community."[331] So, if Hamlet's quest is "to rid the world of the satyr and restore it to Hyperion,"[332] one could of course argue, that Almereyda's Hamlet is set to restore the world back to a state of good and honest media and art, rid of corporatism and globalization. Almereyda's Hamlet, consequently, represents something of an alternative lifestyle.

So, we are left with the ultimate question of Hamlet's inability to take action. Why does he procrastinate for so long? The question is certainly one of the most scrutinized ones in the history of studying *Hamlet*, but here I will take a look at just a few explanations relevant to viewing the film. Jenkins, on the one hand, suggests that delay is inherent in the play itself, and that this should not necessarily entail delay on purpose. ". . . it is not merely that the story requires revenge to be deferred till the end (which, as I have suggested, need not imply procrastination), but that it leads the hero towards a destiny which a man who aspires to virtue does not willingly accept."[333] A.D. Nuttall, on the other hand, makes a point of Christianity, which, by definition,

[330] Cantor 1989, 52.
[331] Jenkins 2003, 127.
[332] Jenkins 2003, 131: a reference to the old King, "So excellent a King, that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr" (1:2:139-140), in which "Hyperion of course is the god of the sun in human form and a satyr is a creature half man half best".
[333] Jenkins 2003, 146.

forbids revenge. This puts Hamlet in an ethical conflict, as he finds himself in between two great entities: should he go along Christian morals, or obey his father.

> But the Bible says that revenge is wrong. It has been said that in all he philosophizing and questioning in *Hamlet* no one ever seems to notice that revenge is forbidden. In fact, Hamlet obviously knows that revenge is a sin. When he is listing his own faults, he says, "I am very proud, *revengeful*, ambitious" (III.i.123-24).[334]

Now, we have the Bible and the dramatic need to defend Hamlet's delay, but how does this function in Almereyda's film, then? Given Hamlet's overall indifferent presence, we do not necessarily associate action with him. However, as Hawke pointed out, his Hamlet is, indeed, a human being who does not take killing lightly. Like in the original play, he first needs to be sure of Claudius's guilt, and even then he hesitates. In the play the first attempt to kill Claudius is frustrated by the very fact that he finds Claudius praying, and cannot, therefore, bring himself to kill a praying man. In the film, similarly, he is unable to shoot Claudius, who is seemingly repenting what he has done. What is more, on a universal level, Hamlet does not really need to kill Claudius, once he has made him face his own guilt. Nuttall continues: "The Bible gives two reasons for not taking revenge; first, because revenge should be transcended by love (Matt. 5:38), and second, because it is God's job ("Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," Rom. 12:19.)."[335] So, perhaps Hamlet is tempted to trust God to take care of the revenge.

Though it seems understandable that Hamlet should not go rush and kill Claudius, he himself is evidently bothered by his inaction, both in the play as well as in Almereyda's direction. He is, still after killing Polonius, wondering about his irresoluteness: "I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, / Sith I have

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[334] Nuttall, A.D. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, 203.
[335] Ibid.

cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't."[336] It is not until after sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths that Hamlet, both in the play and the film, finds some "divine power" in him it, to take action, to set things right.[337] Like Guevara and Malcolm X, Hamlet stays true to his cause, and with the Christ interpretation still in mind, redeems Denmark's sins. He is determined to set things right, and stays insistent in his new-found determination, showing no signs of repenting the kills – "Why, man, they did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience, their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow."[338] Suddenly, then, there is an air of each getting what they deserve, and a belief in destiny. Consequently, Hamlet is set to avenge.

> He that hath killed my king and whor'd my mother,
> Popped in between th'election and my hopes,
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life
> And with such coz'nage – is't not perfect conscience
> To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil?[339]

Jenkins claims that here, Hamlet can finally accept his place in the mortal world, and "instead of recoiling from what life involves, he is willing to play his part."[340] What is quite ironic, Cantor argues, is the fact that Hamlet's delay costs the lives of Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and of Ophelia, even:

> Hamlet was not supposed to harm his mother, and yet by the end of the play she lies dead. He was not supposed to taint his mind, and yet by the end of the play he has the blood of Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Laertes on his hands.[341]

If we think of Hamlet's inability in the context of the current world, his inaction could, of course, still be linked with the Western world, and its passive well-off

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[336] *Hamlet,* 4:4:43-6.
[337] Jenkins 2003, 158.
[338] *Hamlet*, 5:2:57-9.
[339] *Hamlet*, 5:2:64-70.
[340] Jenkins 2003, 158.
[341] Cantor 1989, 59.

offspring, discussed earlier in chapter 5.2.1. With a little exaggeration, it is not until he absolutely has to that this grungy Hamlet finally takes action; until then, he is free to play with his pixel-vision camera and dwell in his gloomy thoughts. With a kinder approach to his procrastination, one could however see Hamlet's delay as necessary time to contemplate on everything that has happened, and to make sure the decisions he is making are the right ones.

5.9 *Given to Fly* – The Ending

So, Almereyda's Hamlet is quite rebellious and tends to swim upstream, but it remains somewhat unclear whether he succeeds in achieving anything meaningful, or if he is, after all, just a dilettante. At the end of the day, he does kill Claudius, after much hesitation and inability to take action, but he, of course, winds up dying himself as well.

5.9.1 *Did He Arrive too Late and too Tethered Away*? – The Fatalist Hamlet

Burnett argues that in the end, Hamlet does seem to find some kind of closure. There is an air of resignation, even, as he speaks with Horatio, just before the dual.

> We defy augury. There is special providence
> in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to
> come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not
> now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no
> man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to
> leave betimes? Let be.[342]

This new Hamlet is something of a fatalist, convinced that there is nothing he could do that would alter the outcome of the events, if God wills otherwise.[343] Just before "Let be," Almereyda's screenplay reads, "Hamlet glances up – and sees his father

[342] *Hamlet* 5:2:215-220.
[343] Cantor 1989, 58.

standing beside the refrigerator. Their eyes meet. Hamlet is reconciled, unafraid."[344] There is, indeed, suddenly a kind of peace about Almereyda's Hamlet, with little of the teenager-like, rebellious appearance left. In fact, Almereyda is just echoing the original text. As Knights points out, at the end Hamlet's nobility is restored:

> This Hamlet, who has shown himself so torn and distracted, suddenly appears composed, with a fortitude that has in it nothing of the emotional heightening – of at times the near hysteria – that has accompanied his courage on former occasions.[345]

On the other hand, however, again Hamlet is in a way let off the hook of taking responsibility. Earlier, he was able to linger on and think big thoughts, without having to worry about anything material, and now, after much contemplating and aguish, he suddenly thinks of destiny: things that are bound to happen, happen, no matter what he does.

After being shot by Laertes, and waiting for death to come, Hamlet is pictured reviewing "in an accelerated montage the key events of both the film and his life;"[346] Hamlet goes through the action of revenge, and so a movie convention he rejected earlier is now embraced, and he can "cognitively 'map' the story that he inaugurated with the film-within-a-film."[347] Hamlet finds in himself, as well as in his autobiography, a custom-made role model, and so he does not need any iconic role models anymore: he gets out of immaturity and "puts 'schizoid' signifiers into a coherent narrative."[348] Moreover, Hamlet now pictures these mental images without any kind of electronic equipment, for the first time in the course of the film. This, of course, is a small victory over the overwhelming presence of technology in the film. With it, Hamlet appears to find his peace of mind, as Horatio sends him off with

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[344] Almereyda 2000, 118.
[345] Knights 1996, 215.
[346] Burnett 2003, 63.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Burnett 2003, 62.

"Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."[349] Further, the dual between Hamlet and Laertes gives closure for the two men, seemingly each other's opposites: "In the final contest between them [sic] two sons avenging their fathers, yet each tainted with the evil he would destroy, punish one another, yet die forgiving one another."[350]

5.9.2 *This Is My Last Exit*

However, there is another possible reading to the final scene of a supposedly centered Hamlet at the end of the film. Hamlet is still subjected to some kind of surveillance, as there is a strong presence of Almereyda's use of the Pixel 2000 camera, paralleled with Hamlet's own pixilated montage of images: "He is yet to assume control over his own show."[351] Similarly, after Hamlet has died, we do not get Horatio reporting us Hamlet's cause. Instead, quite like the "Alas, poor Yorick" scene was replaced with a song, here Almereyda gives us, as the final scene of the film, a TV anchorman Robert MacNeil reading a mélange of moralities collected from speeches of Shakespeare's original Player King, from the play within a play.[352]

In fact, Lanier argues that casting MacNeil as the TV anchor discusses the role of television journalism in media culture; using MacNeil is an obvious reference to his long association with *The MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour* which was aired on public television as a "putatively noncommercial, independent journalistic alternative to network newscasts."[353]So, in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, perhaps after all, the final word is given to alterative media. Lanier argues that (despite the fact that Almereyda himself

[349] *Hamlet*, 5:2:364-5.
[350] Jenkins 2003, 158.
[351] Burnett 2003, 63.
[352] Burnett 2003 64.
[353] Lanier 2002, 178.

refers to the newsman as "another corporate mouthpiece"[354]) the broadcast is still an obvious commentary on the destructiveness of corporate culture, "opening up a space for institutional self-critique within public media not apparent earlier."[355] So, we get MacNeil reciting "Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown; / Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own."[356] Lanier points out that it is somewhat difficult to ignore the word "devices" (apart from the original allusion to devices as the schemes and designs) as an allusion to the immense display of media technology in the film.

However, the matter is not as straightforward as it seems: "…the final line is the more resonant, suggesting at once an ironizing of any attempts to control fate or media "devices" and the privileging of a private subjective space – 'our thoughts' – that remains inviolably 'ours'."[357] Almereyda thus links this space to his film with images that flash before Hamlet's eyes as he is dying; images that are, in fact, Hamlet's own "thoughts" from his private video archive. So, not only is the supposedly independent news anchor an allusion to the triumph of alternative media, but also Hamlet's alternative footages are given centrality. Or, as Lanier concludes, the ending "returns us to an ideal of private, independent video as a way of evading the system that turns all art to commerce and subjects all identities to control."[358] So, looking from this angle, Hamlet does, after all, seem to accomplish something with his art.

An ironic note, at the very ending, is to show a title card reading "from the play by William Shakespeare," following the slow close-up of a teleprompter with the words of the Player King, read by MacNeil. Again, Almereyda exposes the device,

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[354] Lanier 2002, 178.
[355] Ibid.
[356] *Hamlet* 3:2:206-8.
[357] Lanier 2002, 179.
[358] Ibid.

Lanier continues. This works on the one hand as a reminder of and a return to the overwhelming weight of a Shakespeare's text as a source; here the text self-reflexively claims that somehow Shakespeare's thoughts in fact remain his own, despite "their media-appropriation to 'ends none of his own'."[359] However, despite all this, the teleprompter does force us to recognize the never-ending presence of the ominous machinery of media power that operates behind the scenes. And again, we have to return to the point of not really knowing whether Hamlet manages to accomplish something, or at least we cannot say for sure who has the power in the final shots of the film. Is it Shakespeare as the source, Hamlet as the dead alternative video-grapher or the media corporation behind it all?

Accordingly, Lanier goes on to show that at the same time, while all the devices have not been overthrown, the emphasis of the film is on the overwhelming power of the media system. Paradoxically this happens right when the system "seems to open up a space for self-critique," one that was founded on something traditionally regarded as a symbolic point of resistance to commercial media, that is, Shakespeare's language.[360] Further, as Horatio sends Hamlet off with the "Flights of Angels," we get an image of a jumbo jet taking off into the sky – "Even his departing soul," Abbate closes, "rather than being attended by 'flights of angels' . . . flies up to heaven in an aircraft: it is technological ascension."[361] Yu Jin Ko has even a harsher reading of the scene:

> As if to reinforce the suspicion that no flights of angels could sing this bloodied Hamlet to his rest, immediately after Horatio delivers his instant elegy, the film cuts to the image of an airplane flying above and leaving merely a jet stream behind.[362]

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[359] Lanier 2002, 179.
[360] Lanier 2002, 179.
[361] Abbate 2004, 87.
[362] Yu Jin Ko 2005, 28.

At the end of the day, however, Ko's reading of the ending seems a little comfortless. After all the time Hamlet spends unaware of what he should do – though he seems somehow shiftless and some of his angst self-inflicted – you are willing to grant him peace of mind and angels that will sing him to his sleep.

6. *Vengeance Has No Place on Me or Her* – Conclusion

At the end of the day, as Knights argues, quoting C.S. Lewis's ideas, *Hamlet* is not really only about a man whose character is "an enigma to be unraveled," but rather about a man who happens to suffer a certain kind of experience, and the "man and the experience go together." Nor is the play merely about a man who simply could not make up his mind, or a man with mind-boggling reasons for refusing to act.[363] On a wider scale it is, however, a play about death and corruption:

> When we are really living through the experience both are present to our consciousness under wide-ranging aspects: death as mere physical fact and as metaphysical terror; corruption as obtuseness, gross sensuality and deliberate contrived evil.[364]

Almereyda's Hamlet, I would argue, deals with these same concerns. Both death and corruption are very much present in the film; they are just given a new, modernized context. Underneath the updated surface, therefore, Almereyda deals with rather universal and established problems linked to *Hamlet*, and so, fidelity criticism put aside, Almereyda does seem to capture the *spirit* of the play.

Adapting Shakespeare is never a simple task, and by doing that, the director puts him- or herself in the line of fire of puritan critics, as there will always be those who do not feel the adaptation does justice to *their* interpretation of the play, and who feel like something sacred has been violated. Comparing literature and film is more often than not based on the rigid hierarchies of the two arts, and the dichotomy between these "lower" and "higher" arts is emphasized in much of the adaptation criticism. So, instead of digging out injustices done to Shakespeare's text, it makes more sense to explore what is gained through the adaptation process. Consequently, I have tried to show that when talking about adaptations, literal faithfulness is not only

[363] Knights 1966, 181.
[364] Ibid.

undesirable, but also impossible, as already the change in the medium alters everything; you cannot create a one-to-one adaptation when the words on a page suddenly turn into images on film.

Almereyda's low-budget, art-house type of a production of *Hamlet*, consequently, is a postmodernist film in which contemporary issues are discussed through the old play. The cast, omission of scenes and even the music in the background all have a say in the way we "read" the film, and while each is entitled to their own interpretation, there are some central, contemporary themes that are worth summing up. First of all, Almereyda appears to criticize much of the modern way of living; for instance, mass production and capitalism are under scrutiny. In addition, in the wake of many larger-scale Shakespeare productions of the 1990s, Almereyda discusses the generational alienation, and pays attention to the effects of urban existence. All in all, as Mark Thornton Burnett sums it up, the film is a

> distinctively postmodernist cinematic statement that charts the ways in which the act of filmmaking allows a release from the pressures of global capitalism at the same moment as it creates a space for the articulation of a coherent subjectivity.[365]

At the bottom, however, there are even more fundamental questions: how do we choose who and what we are, and what is real and authentic? Moreover, how are we to define these things in a world filled with reproductions and inauthenticity? Even the problematics of the birth of the modern individual and individuality are issues of the original play itself, as well as things that concern Almereyda's *Hamlet*. Along with issues concerning resistance, rebellion and authenticity in it all, the film discusses the impact of the overwhelming technology and surveillance, how they affect our lives, and how they even hinder people's capability to feel and communicate with each other.

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[365] Burnett 2003, 48.

The critique of technology and mass production is linked with the problem of authenticity and Jean Baudrillard's theories of the simulacra, that is, how art for instance, at the end of the day, is just copies of copies. Similarly in Almereyda's film, art is mere repetition of pre-existent texts, films or other works of art. Hamlet, the grungy rebel who is supposedly trying to find the truth and authenticity of things, and who is against all the corporatism around him, is something of a dilettante himself, as he resorts to reproducing already reproduced images. He is lost with himself, with his art and his relationships, and from time to time seems to even lose his sense of reality. Further, situating the film in modern New York is easily defendable: the political and cultural connotations linked with New York, as well as the heavy history it has as a *mise-en-scène* in films all defend Almereyda's choice of location.

Overall, what makes Almereyda's adaptation distinctive, like Burnett argues, is the extent to which an "emphasis on the cinematic idiom facilitates the entertainment of postmodern considerations," as the film represents the central components of postmodernism.[366] Burnett goes on to quote Mike Featherstone on defining these components, which take the form of

> the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favoring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody and pastiche, irony, playfulness, and the celebration of the surface "depthlessness" of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that art can only be repetition.[367]

What it all boils down to, I would argue, is some kind of universality. Contemporary problems turn out to be not just contemporary, but universal; the world has changed in the 400 odd years since *Hamlet* was written, but the mind of the human kind has not. Certainly there are old ideologies or just small details that simply do not fit our world,

[366] Burnett 2003, 49.
[367] Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* 1991, 7-8; quoted in Burnett 2003, 49.

and these have to be, accordingly, either translated or omitted. So, we get the ski caps and lap tops that not only work as equivalents of inky cloaks and death warrants, but leave us wondering how they are relevant to the reading of the play text in its modern surroundings.

So, if *Hamlet* was first born at the crossroads of the death of chivalry and the birth of globalization, in a point of historical and cultural transition where the world was changing dramatically, Almereyda's film is situated in a similar, though a modern point of transition. While Shakespeare found himself writing the play in the mayhem of the geocentric model collapsing and Catholicism losing its ground, Almereyda works in a world where technocentrism is taking over all facets of life. Similarly, if the birth of the modern individual was one of the more abstract themes in the original *Hamlet*, in its updated film version we are introduced to a technologized individual, who is supposedly connected to the whole world, but finds him- or herself all the more isolated. Globalization has been taken to the extreme, and the divine plan that guided the Elizabethans has now been replaced with the divine commerciality and technology that defines people's lives. In both the original play and Almereyda's film there is, indeed, an air of uncertainty about the future: both Hamlets find themselves in a new situation, in a new era. They do not know what is coming, but despite the different determinants in their lives, they both do decide to take a leap of faith and trust themselves in the hands of destiny, divinity, or whatever it is they believe will take care of things. In short, if it was modernity that was lurking behind the corner in the original *Hamlet*, in Almereyda's work it was the concern of the new millennium with its new challenges.

So, starting from the theoretical approaches to adaptations, diving into grunge and ending up with a critique of the Western way of living, of mass media and

corporatism, will perhaps give an overview of the complicated issues that may be linked to film adaptations of earlier texts, particularly such established texts as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Each little detail appears to open a completely new branch of study, and so this thesis has by no means said all there is to be said of Almereyda's *Hamlet*. I have tried to focus on the contemporary phenomena that may have affected Almereyda's interpretation of the play, but at the same time tried to keep more universal themes, such as Baudrillard's simulacra, in mind.

It would be interesting to take a deeper dive into the different adaptations of the play, say, those of Zeffirelli, Olivier and Branagh, to compare and contrast the choices the directors have made and to interpret each adaptations' political and cultural environments from which they hailed. This, however, could make a thesis of its own, so I have kept my focus mostly on Almereyda. He offers us a film that may not be the greatest adaptation ever, but certainly an adaptation that gives plenty to think about, as it is a socially conscious film, with all the comments on the way we live today. What I have done in this thesis is, however, nothing but a scratch on the surface of many of the issues discussed here. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to point out the essence of the central themes and concerns that I have concentrated on. It is difficult, better yet impossible, to come to any definite conclusions about a play that has been made into so many adaptations, and whose definite origins are not even known. Instead, each adaptation should be respected as an entity of its own, and as something that tells of the time it was created in. So, quoting Keyishian once more; when Shakespeare meets the movies, indeed two mighty entities converge.[368]

[368] Keyishian 2005, 72.

We do not understand Shakespeare from a single reading, and certainly not from a single play. . . . and it is a work of years to venture even one individual interpretation of a pattern in Shakespeare's carpet.

T. S. Eliot[369]

[369] Quoted in Knights 1966, 6.

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